MONTSEGUR & THE CATHAR ENIGMA

JEAN MARKALE

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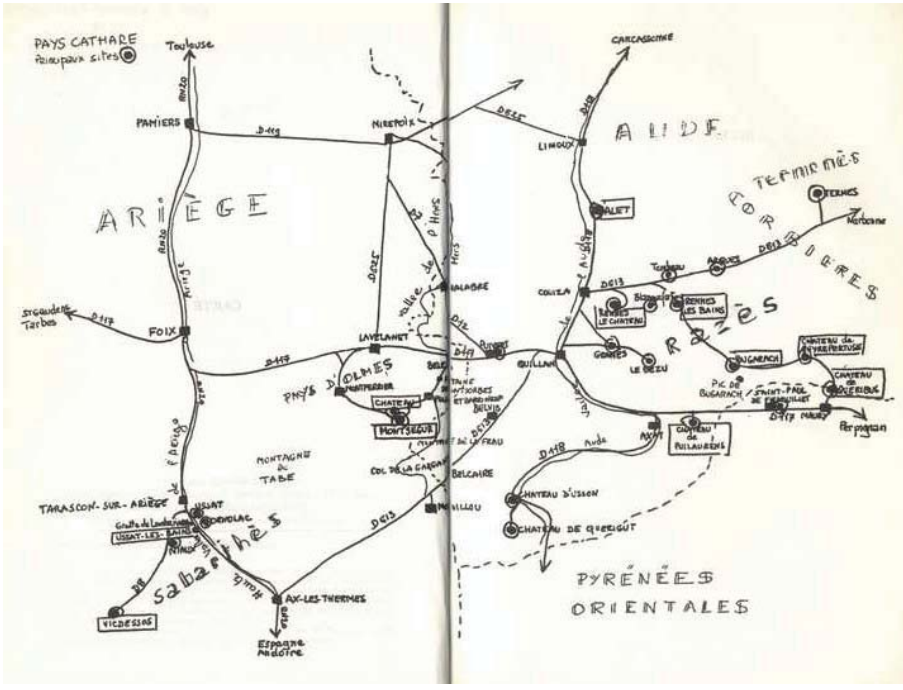
Jean Markale

MONTSÉGUR

and the Cathar enigma

MAP


PAYS CATHARE
Toulouse
CARCASSONNE
PAMIERS
NIEPOUX
LIMOUX
AUDE
ARIÈGE
QUILLAN
FOIX
LAVELANET
MONTSÉGUR
MONTAGNE DE TABE
COL DE LA CAMAU
BELCAIRE
TARASCON-SUR-ARIÈGE
USSAT
USSAT-LES-BAINS
ORDIAC
VICDESSOS
AX-LES-THERMES
Espagne
PYRÉNÉES ORIENTALES
PERPIGNAN

PART ONE

The Places

I

A LONG MARCH TOWARDS MONTSÉGUR

The name Montségur has echoed in people's memories ever since the bonfire was lit in 1244 on the slopes of a mountain said to be sacred, where two hundred and five outcasts, convicted of heresy and persisting in their errors, were burned. But it seems that the flames of that pyre continue to illuminate not only the deep valleys of the Ariège Pyrenees, but also the tortuous recesses of humanity's guilty conscience. What, under the reign of the good King Louis IX, who became Saint Louis, might have passed for a simple police operation – and indeed it was one – or a regrettable hiccup, has taken on a universal dimension, deliberately evoking human intolerance, fanaticism and injustice. Injustice above all, whether from a religious or political perspective: we no longer accept – at least when the event dates back to a bygone era – that a people can be deprived of their deeply held beliefs and, at the same time, of their political independence. For the Albigensian Crusade, as no one can now doubt, was as much political as it was religious, the two motivations converging and harmonising perfectly from an economic perspective. This

The 'injustice' of Montségur has become a crime. And crimes are not forgotten by so quickly: they even tend to definitively promote those who are its unfortunate victims. The blood of Christian martyrs still stains the ground of the Roman circuses, and the cross of Jesus still stands on Golgotha. But it is not the same cross: Jesus's was *T-shaped*, and the one shown to us is a solar symbol inherited from the dawn of time.

It is indeed the case that an ‘event’ worthy of a place in human memory, once filtered through the passage of time, is not stripped of its original meaning, but rather imbued with and enriched by new resonances. We even sometimes come to regard the place where this ‘event’ took place as the essential element of remembrance, thereby giving it a symbolic value that prolongs it whilst distorting it. This is the case with Montségur, a key centre of Cathar resistance against the Church and Capetian power. One would have greatly astonished the two hundred and five ‘Perfects’ who threw themselves onto the pyre by asking them where they had hidden the *Grail*. Although the name *‘Grail’* is of Occitan origin, it is not certain that the Cathars knew it or that they attached to it the confused notions with which we now associate it. It is only since the late 19th century, and especially since Richard Wagner’s **Parsifal**, that Montségur has been associated with the Grail. Yet it must be said that Richard Wagner would have raised a hue and cry upon learning of this association, he who was firmly convinced – could it be otherwise? – that the Grail Castle was located in Bavaria or on the banks of the Rhine. It is true that Wagner erred through an excess of Germanic bias and somewhat overlooked the earlier Celtic and Occitan texts on the theme of the Grail. Be that as it may, one thing is clear: Montségur is a Cathar fortress or temple, and it is also – perhaps – the castle where the Fisher King jealously guards what Chrétien de Troyes, the first to mention it, cautiously calls *a* Grail, without, however, specifying what it is. This only adds to the mystery, and Montségur, that eagle’s nest towards which all the clouds of the world converge, acquires an undeniably legendary *aura*.

In my memory, Montségur is first and foremost a few lines and a drawing in a school textbook that was fiercely anti-Albigensian, from which emerged the figure of Simon de Montfort, a vigilant guardian of orthodoxy, cloaked in heroism. It was a time when I could not question what they were trying to teach me. After all, Montségur and the Cathars were very far away, both in

in time and space: my world lay between Paris and Brittany. It was only later, in 1942, when I was in Year 9, that the shadow of Montségur resurfaced through the Forest of Brocéliande, which was both a reality to me—since it was the land of my childhood—and which was brought to life again through the study of medieval French literature. We had, in fact, a literature teacher, Jean Hani—who has since written some remarkable works—who was passionate about the tales of the Round Table and contemporary poetry. I thus had the opportunity to familiarise myself with the legend of Tristan and Iseult, that of Merlin—which I was already partly familiar with—and that of Perceval in search of the Holy Grail. But alongside this immersion in the past, there were also the poets of the 20th century, and amongst them Maurice Magre. For Maurice Magre represented not only the discovery of contemporary literature, but also the Grail at Montségur.

Of course, I had no opinion on the matter. To me, the Holy Grail was as abstract a concept as the fortress of Montségur; yet I was surprised that a Pyrenean setting could serve as the backdrop for an adventure that I could only regard as distinctly Breton. It was the dark period of the Occupation. The radio, under German control, played Wagner's *'Prelude and Death* of *Isolde'* ad nauseam, as well as the prelude to *'Parsifal'* or *'The Enchantment of Good Friday*': I loved that music, and I still do, for it served as a backdrop when I imagined scenarios based on Arthurian themes. I had seen Marcel Carné's film, *Les Visiteurs du soir*, which had thrilled me and definitively convinced me to delve deep into the Middle Ages to discover what others must not yet have glimpsed. A little later, I saw Jean Delannoy's *L'Éternel Retour*, in which the myth of Tristan is so magnificently – and so aptly – adapted by Jean Cocteau. Cinema, music, medieval literature, contemporary poetry—this strange combination would make me what I have become: an ageless knight in search of a Grail that eludes me every time I think I can reach it, at

a detour along a path, through the dark forests that my imagination fills with fairy-tale creatures, those strange women who emerge from the mounds to point travellers in a direction that may not be the right one.

In all this, Montségur served as a beacon, but a beacon I had no need to reach, since for me, the Castle of the Grail could be nowhere other than in Brittany, or indeed in Great Britain, as I knew that the origins of the Arthurian romances lay across the Channel. Admittedly, I had read commentaries on the resemblance between the name Montségur and that of Montsalvage, where the wounded King Anfortas awaits the arrival of Parzival. I had even checked the text by Wolfram von Eschenbach, which Wagner used to construct the libretto for his opera, but I could see little connection between *Muntsalvasche* (the name used by Wolfram), meaning 'Mount of Salvation', and Montségur, meaning 'Safe Mountain'. And when I passed through Montsûrs, in the Mayenne, I knew that this name, like that of the castle in Ariège, derived from *the* same *Mons Securus*. Moreover, in French romances, the Grail castle is Corbénic, and my visceral anti-German sentiment – which was rather fashionable at the time – led me to deliberately exclude Montsalvage from my legendary field of vision. Montségur, of course, remained.

But as a citizen *of Albi*, the term 'Cathar' was still unknown to me. In my mind, the people of Albi were then a nuisance, people with strange ideas who believed in the existence of an evil god opposed to a god of good. In any case, I saw nothing in common between these otherworldly heretics and the Celts, whom I suspected, even back then, of having a troublesome tendency towards heresy. But it couldn't be the same heresy. And whilst, reading the poems of the Troubadours, I wondered who this mysterious, inaccessible and *never-seen* Lady was whom they sang of with such love, I did not for a single second imagine that she might be a figure of speech used to refer, in veiled terms, to the Church of the Believers and the Perfect. Of tendencies

Being deeply ‘monistic’ and systematically rejecting the absolute opposition between good and evil, I found it impossible at the time to feel any affinity with those dualist heretics. Besides, Occitania was a long way off, and the shores of Armorica were where the main currents of my imagination converged.

Montségur was thus buried deep in my memory and only resurfaced in the late 1960s. The occasion was the broadcast, on French television, of a drama series by Stellio Lorenzi about the Cathars, which was certainly of interest and had the merit of explaining, to a very wide audience, the main events of the tragedy experienced by the people of Occitania in the 13th century – everything that school textbooks failed to mention. And above all, for me, there was the opening credits of this series, sumptuous and magnificent: a view, probably taken from a helicopter, of the fortress perched on that seemingly inaccessible mountain, which, through the camera’s movement, literally whirled like a comet seeking a place to alight in the midst of a tormented world. And the musical accompaniment, borrowed from Sergei Prokofiev’s *Alexander Nevsky*, gave this image a prodigious dimension, bordering on hallucination. It left me with a profound sense of vertigo which, ever since, has never left me.

I felt as though I were facing a void, a void created not only by the power of the poetic image itself, which was very potent, but also by the background to that image. These mysterious Cathars, about whom I knew nothing and who had entered history in the same way as the Celts—through legend—were the only ones who could fill the void I felt. But how could I trace their footsteps, how could I discern, within the products of the mind—literature, the visual arts, architecture—the vestiges that the Inquisitors, bent on their destruction, had inevitably made disappear? I had read some of René Nelli’s works: but the Cathar philosophy he unearthed seemed so far removed from my own concerns at the time that I had given up on going any further, in a direction one might describe as ‘theological’.

On the other hand, the poetry of the troubadours captivated me, and I strove to discover, in the work of some of them, the path that would lead me to Montségur—the true Montségur, the one that is nowhere, yet everywhere, the ideal and secret lair of what I imagined to be the Grail.

I owe a great deal to René Nelli. He introduced me to one of the most important texts of the Occitan Middle Ages, the *Roman de Jaufré*, of which he published a magnificent translation. This archaic Arthurian epic, penned by a writer of genius, provided me with virtually all the keys to unlocking the mysteries of the legend of Arthur and the Grail. It is a fundamental text, predating in conception the now-classic tales of Chrétien de Troyes and the *Prose Lancelot*. It showed me the subtle connections that exist between medieval Occitan civilisation and Celtic traditions. And I confess that, in this text, I have glimpsed the shadow of the Believers and the Perfects on several occasions.

But it was above all through his study of the eroticism of the Troubadours that René Nelli set me on a path from which I could never stray. I was desperately seeking to establish firm links between Celtic conceptions of love, as found in the legend of Tristan and in Irish epics, and the famous
'courtly love', which I prefer to call '*fine amor*', as this term seems to me to best capture the deeper meaning of the expression. In the light of this study, what had once seemed to me merely a refined courtly game in keeping with the rules of Christian morality became a tangle of archaic rituals that did not quite conform to the usual norms of Christian orthodoxy. La *fine amor* suddenly took on a strange air, and its scent was distinctly sulphurous. I had read so many times that the poetry of the Troubadours had been influenced by Islam: but it was certainly not Arab civilisation that I was finding there. Clearly, this was a pre-Christian and pre-Islamic initiatory path, and I began to think that the Cathars must have had something to do with it. We shall see that this intuition was far from being far from the reality. And this initiatory path led

undoubtedly to the fortress of Montségur. The problem was how to fit the history of the Cathars into the pattern that had thus emerged. Montségur still seemed a long way off to me.

There were other signs too, and one of them particularly puzzled me: it was Otto Rahn's strange book, *The Crusade Against the Grail*. It was not the content of the book that worried me: I had already read, on the Celts in general and the Grail in particular, ramblings far more implausible than Otto Rahn's visions—visions which, moreover, were merely a copy of those of a more enigmatic figure, Antonin Gadal. Nor was it the fact that a German had taken an interest in the question of the Grail or that of the Cathars: I knew nothing specific about Otto Rahn, and the research carried out by Christian Bernadac on the subject had not yet been published. It was, however, easy to understand that in the 1930s, during the rise of Nazism, German intellectuals , not not of the dissidents, but of the 'officials' – that is, those acting in accordance with National Socialist ideology – were searching *for something* in the Pyrenees, amongst the Cathars, and more specifically at Montségur. There was always this connection between Montségur and Montsalvage. And I knew that Adolf Hitler had planned to celebrate the final victory of the Third Reich with an exceptional and grandiose performance of Wagner's *Parsifal*. I also knew that the birth of Nazism in Germany had been surrounded by strange fairies, more or less secret societies with distinctly occult tendencies, such as the group known as of Thule, which was described as 'Polar' movements, all of which sought to restore a Nordic-Aryan order in the face of Mediterranean and Semitic cosmopolitanism. I was fully aware that the Grail – *that of Wagner and Wolfram von Eschenbach*, but not the Celtic Grail – might have been a symbol of racial purity: the ambiguity of the medieval German text lends itself to the wildest interpretations. But what of the Cathars in all this? The word 'Cathar' means 'pure': you know what I mean…

In these circumstances, realising that any investigation into the Cathars would lead me to entertain hypotheses I was loath to entertain—being, by deep conviction, at the very opposite end of the spectrum from National Socialist ideology—I decided to abandon the path to Montségur. I would not go to the Pyrenees, a region I did not know and which held no appeal for me. I would leave the Cathars where they were, and I cared little whether the Grail had been linked to them. My Grail lay elsewhere, and I was determined to prove it, if only through an enigmatic, lost engraving on a granite slab inside the Gavrinis mound, in the Gulf of Morbihan. I could hardly hide my irritation, moreover, whenever anyone spoke to me of Montségur and the Grail, and I would launch into scholarly discourses to demonstrate the incompatibility of the Cathars' dualistic thought with the Celts' monistic system. The Cathars were merely heretics, like so many others, who had not been fortunate enough to be protected by princes as powerful as those who had aided Luther or Calvin. And Montségur was merely a fortress perched on a rocky peak, of the sort found in abundance in France, particularly in the Pyrenees and the Massif Central. In Brittany, although the Bretons call their hills 'mountains', there are no fortresses on the summits. But there are sanctuaries, often very modest chapels. It was these that caught my attention, and it was in their foundations that I found traces of the Druids. And the Druids, it must be said, spoke to me more than the Perfect Ones.

In 1978, I was working on a series of radio programmes which I had titled 'A Brief Anthology of Popular Beliefs', and which involved giving a voice to the last remaining bearers of these popular beliefs across the various regions of France. I had just finished the series on Brittany with my old colleagues Pierre-Jakez Hélias and Charles Le Quintrec, and I had decided to continue with the Languedoc. My interviewee was a given: René Nelli. But time was pressing, and as Nelli was unavailable, I had to change

my plans at the last minute. So, arriving from Belgium, where I had done a live radio broadcast, I found myself one morning in Toulouse, where a technician from FR 3 was waiting for me, tasked with guiding me and recording my work. I began by striking up an interesting conversation with Daniel Fabre, one of the leading experts on the Occitan oral tradition, who was then teaching at the University of Mirail.

Then we set off for Verniolle, a small village near Pamiers, where I was to meet Adelin Moulis, that memorable figure who was one of the most sincere architects of the post-war Occitan intellectual renaissance. It was then that, for the first time in my life, I truly immersed myself in Cathar country. The road to Foix led to peaks half-hidden by clouds, on which I could make out snow. The Pyrenees seemed to me like a sort of hidden world into which I was almost afraid to venture. That dizzying sensation that had gripped me when I saw the opening credits of the TV film about the Cathars came back to me. But as I passed through Saverdun, I couldn't help thinking, with my obsession with etymology, that I was still in Celtic country, as the name undoubtedly contained the Gallic term *duno*, 'fortress'. What fortress? The image of Montségur came to haunt me once more.

We spent many hours recording Adelin Moulis. He spoke of everything, and often digressed, giving free rein to his passion for his country and for the 'observances' he had discovered there. When he spoke to me of Esclarmonde de Foix, I had the impression that he knew her well and that he had met her many times on winding paths, at the confluence of two torrents. Yet, in the little cottage where Adelin Moulis lived, everything was calm and peaceful. The Cathars were not there. Yet they were very close by. I could sense their presence, like familiar shadows beckoning to me. We had a strange meal in a restaurant in Pamiers. Adelin Moulis was an agnostic. The technician was Jewish. I was what I had always been, a Christian by birth, mired in the

the pitfalls of Druidism. We talked at length. It was then that I realised I was somewhere else, in a land that harboured within it all the seeds of heresy, in a land unlike any other, where the Cathars still lived, unbeknownst to anyone, without speaking of it or even thinking about it. Every stone seemed to me a relic. Every roof concealed mysteries. I would have liked to go further. This time, I knew I would go as far as Montségur. Adelin Moulis had taken me to the border: the rest was up to me.

But I was there on a very specific mission that left no room for other approaches. After a final wander through the streets of Toulouse, where I tried to untangle the inextricable knots of Count Raymond VII's relations with the King of France, I set off again for Paris, where I had great difficulty 'editing' Adelin Moulis's speeches to fit the format of my programmes. But the Cathar poison had seeped into my veins. It was no longer a distant and somewhat abstract world that was opening up before me, but something tenacious, like a revealed truth that one accepts without being able to find arguments to contradict it.

One initial observation was that there must be a lasting legacy of Catharism. A doctrine of this kind, lived out with such intensity by people who did not hesitate to die rather than renounce it, is worthy of interest, even if one does not share it. Moreover, it is inconceivable that, despite persecution and a determined effort to wipe it out, such a doctrine should have been lost entirely. I sensed the Cathars around me, even though I was unable to recognise the guise in which they existed within 20th-century southern French society. I felt that this region was imbued with a *different* spirit. I thus came to a second realisation: I knew nothing of Catharism beyond those banal generalities dispensed in history textbooks or tourist guides. Perhaps, after all, there was something more to this doctrine than a crude dualism in which good and evil clash in a merciless battle in the guise of the devil and

the Good Lord. Surely it concealed a reality far more nuanced, far more original. But was I ready to face that reality?

The answer was no. I hadn't completely shaken off my instinctive mistrust. Going all the way to Montségur might have been an act of curiosity, an act of openness, but it was also a plunge into a somewhat unsettling unknown. I had heard too many tall tales about the Celts and Druidism in particular not to fear discovering even more of the same in Montségur. And the shadow of Otto Rahn did not bode well. Even if there is no *Ragnarök*, no
'twilight of the gods', in Celtic mythology, the Germanic eschatology I saw taking shape behind Otto Rahn's adventure served to steer me away from any fundamental research. I also told myself that Cathar country lies within that Visigothic Septimania which left numerous traces on Occitan soil. The Visigoths came from Sweden. The Grail of Montségur was that of Wolfram von Eschenbach: it was a German-Iranian Grail guarded by knights who looked like SS men. I had no desire to write the history of the Third Reich, even in symbolic form.

Yet 1978 was a significant year for me in my attempts to approach the Cathar stronghold, and for that I have Marie Môn to thank. Partly Breton, partly Catalan, but above all Languedocian, and what's more, a Huguenot, she had everything it took to lead me into the heart of heresy. She had plunged into the cold, bubbling water of the Barenton fountain and claimed, quite rightly, I think, that the Calvinists of Occitania are the distant descendants of the
'Bonshommes' hunted down by the Inquisition. She had gone to meditate, alone, behind the walls of Montségur, sheltered from the cold wind which, swept up by the valley, swept down from the surrounding mountains like a long cry of anguish from the depths of time. She had nevertheless sensed that the place lent itself to all manner of ambiguities, that nothing was clear-cut or definitive, and that

sometimes disturbing shadows loomed, at sunset, amongst the clumps of scrawny trees and along the jagged rocks.

It was Marie Môn who led me up to the *hilltop* of Montségur. Coming from Toulouse, where I had once again spoken of the Cursed Gold—which legend claims is that of Delphi, brought back by the Gaul Brennus and desecrated by a Roman proconsul—I found myself back in Saverdun and amongst the plane trees of Pamiers's main square. But this time, I went further. Reassured by the protective presence of the Château de Foix, the watchful guardian of a land that both baffled and fascinated me, I saw the peaks of the Pyrenees rising up, a name that evoked for me 'fire' and 'purity'. Heracles, we are told, strayed there, and it was there that he met the young Pyrene. This story has been told in many versions; another version tells us that the said Heracles, wandering at the other end of Gaul, fell in love with a young princess named Galatea, took the opportunity to found Alesia, and had a son named Galates, ancestor of the Galatians and the Gauls. We know that this Heracles, who bears little resemblance to the Greek demigod, corresponds to the now-folkloric figure of Gargantua, himself an avatar of the Celtic god Ogmios or Ogma, a giant protector of the roads who ensnares humans with the charm of his speech. The Pyrenees are worthy of such a giant, and one might well wonder why, not far from Montségur, on the other side of the Gorges de la Frau, there is a pass called Col de la Gargante. Moreover, to the south of Montségur, at an altitude of 1,619 metres, the Roc de la Gourgue dominates the landscape, seeming even to take under its protection the *hilltop* where the Cathar castle was built. Yet the name Gourgue is undeniably related to that of Gargantua.

In other words, my journey to Montségur was shrouded in a particularly complex mythological atmosphere, in which distinctly Cathar elements, Germanic undertones and Celtic realities all intertwined. Without letting my imagination run wild, I was free to ask myself questions and to try to find answers to them.

We arrived via the road that passes through Montferrier, winding its way through the foothills of the Monts d'Olmes. Further on, over there, on one peak among many, stood some ruins. But were they really ruins? In this land where the rocks crack under the winter frost and the scorching summer sun, one can no longer tell whether what one sees is the result of human destruction, the ravages of time, or a nature in constant flux. The land is crenellated, as if to defend itself against invasions from elsewhere. But the guardians, those who once patrolled these tangled lines of fortifications, have now vanished. And today, roads cut through the mountainsides, through the pine forests, the bare expanses where only boxwoods grow, their green sometimes blending with the colour of the weathered stones. The vegetation is strange because it is a cross between mountain and scrubland. Yet I found something familiar there: that same quality found in certain moors of Brittany, cut off from the human world, and as if haunted by the memory of the mysterious, supernatural inhabitants who once ravaged them. In Brittany, the moors are the domain of the Korrigans, those nocturnal beings who lead travellers astray when they lack the sign of recognition that allows them to cross the forbidden zones. What was the case here? Who, then, was hiding behind the bushes, watching for a sign from me to accept or reject me?

And so we arrived at the *foot of the peak*. Seen from below, it looked even more magnificent than I had dared to hope. It was larger, taller and more forbidding than I had ever seen it in photographs or engravings. Even more formidable in its natural setting than in the skilful framing of the filmmakers who had shot it for that opening sequence that had so impressed me. So, I was ready. I had to set off towards the summit, for that was where I would find the light.

I don't think I've ever climbed a mountainside so quickly, or with such ease. The stones might have rolled beneath my feet, the grass might have given way beneath my soles, but I

I climbed, I climbed. I thought of that passage in Victor Hugo's **The End of Satan**, where the poet depicts the hunter Nimrod soaring into the sky in a cage built from the wreckage of Noah's Ark and pulled by four eagles. And the eagles soared… Why was I thinking of eagles like this? To say that Montségur is an eagle's nest is a cliché of appalling banality: of course this fortress perched on a rocky outcrop is an eagle's nest. So what? Eagles soar higher than men can go in their attempt to wrest Heaven's secrets from it.

And so I reached the walls. Without giving it a second thought, I entered through the south gate, having merely noticed, beneath the slab that serves as a threshold, a strange figure in the shape of a pentagram, clumsily woven from a small, supple twig. After all, why not? I had been told that the pentagram was a symbol commonly used by the Cathars: surely visitors to this sacred site had to perform a symbolic gesture to enter into the 'holy of holies'. When spending the night on a Breton moor, one must carry a forked stick in one's hand to ward off the Korrigans. At Montségur, the *golden bough* could very well have been pentagonal in shape. I should not have been surprised by anything.

Inside the walls, the wind blew, as if furious at my intrusion. I could hear it howling along the ramparts, trying to force its way into every crack and crevice, every shadowed corner. Where on earth was I?

To tell the truth, I felt as though I were in a prison suspended between heaven and earth. I was terrified that I would never be able to leave and would be forced to remain there for all eternity. That fleeting impression, lasting mere tenths of a second, seems inexplicable to me. Did I have in mind the many folk tales that speak of a castle suspended in the air, mysteriously fastened by four golden chains to something that is not named, but which is situated higher up and is invisible? Or was I thinking of that 'Crystal Chamber' where, in the beautiful medieval text of La *Folie Tristan*, the hero,

disguised as a madman, declares to King Mark that he will take Queen Isolde away? Is this 'Crystal Chamber' not the same as the 'Sun Chamber' of Irish legends, where anyone who stays there is revitalised by the heavenly light? Is it not also the 'Invisible Castle', the 'prison of air' where the fairy Viviane imprisoned the enchanter Merlin? Is it not *the 'Merlin's plucker'*, as a 13th-century text puts it?

All these thoughts were flooding through my mind without my being able to make any sense of them. They struck me at the same rhythm as the gusts of wind. Imagination is a wonderful thing. The key is knowing how to use it, and to do that, one must master it. I still believe, even today, that these were merely fleeting images, and that in no way, upon entering the fortress of Montségur, did I make any connection between those legends I knew so well and the oft-put-forward theory that this structure is in fact a solar temple. I was simply living in the moment.

And I did not handle it well.

In the courtyard, two men were taking measurements using a surveyor's chain. They were feverishly jotting down figures in a notebook. Another man was hugging the walls, trying to work out the alignment. On the eastern platform, accessible via a staircase, someone was reciting a poem in German. I climbed up too. Over there, in the distance, peaks, nothing but peaks. The wind carried away the voice of the man reciting the poem.

So I looked *down*.

I have never felt such intense, agonising vertigo as I did on that occasion. As I gazed at those jagged slopes, those ravines opening up beneath me like a hellish abyss, I could not fight the numbing terror that was overwhelming me. No matter how much I tried to talk myself out of it, nothing helped. Pascal recounts somewhere—or rather imagines—that if a very sturdy but very narrow plank were placed between the two towers of Notre-Dame de Paris, and if the bravest

philosopher in the world to cross from one tower to the other in this way, he would be so terrified that he would refuse to go any further. Pascal seeks to demonstrate that intellectual certainty is powerless in the face of the power of the imagination, and that the latter is a visceral reality. It is true that Pascal did not suffer from vertigo, he who had subjected himself to the famous mercury column experiment on the Puy-de-Dôme. But I, for my part, did suffer from vertigo, an excruciating vertigo that drove me back inside the walls. There, at least, despite that feeling of imprisonment, I had the illusion of safety.

But when I had to make my way back down, it was far worse. I don't think I've ever felt such a void within me. And that void was caused by the slope that I hadn't noticed as I'd cheerfully made my way up, but which now loomed before my eyes in all its immensity. I had to crawl, wriggling on all fours through the undergrowth, having no confidence in the stones of the path that I saw rolling beneath my feet and causing gigantic avalanches in which I was, of course, caught up. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who took a certain pleasure in suffering, would spend hours leaning over fearsome precipices, and would even go so far as to throw stones into them, imagining that these stones were himself being hurled into the darkest abysses of fear. Every precipice is an open womb. Are we afraid of being swallowed up by it, are we afraid of travelling the path *in reverse*, of thus breaking the continuous line of becoming, of dissolving into the primordial ocean of non-existence? I would be tempted to answer in the affirmative. But was that all there was to it?

Human thought seems to move faster than its verbal expression. What did that overwhelming sense of vertigo contain? The realm of the imagination spread out beneath me and I could grasp it: it was not, then, unreal, and it was not a physical void that haunted me that afternoon as I made my way down the slopes of the Montségur *plateau* as best I could. I wonder if I did not have a fleeting vision of the tragedy that unfolded in this very place in

the year 1244, when two hundred and five ‘perfect ones’ perished in the flames at the foot of *the hill*. And beyond that sacrifice, whose smoke has not yet died down, I think there was also the immense void that is the Cathar enigma. Mystery is always frightening. But it draws us in. There is a certain pleasure in being overcome by vertigo: delving into the abysses of shadow is an act as thrilling, as exhilarating, as soaring towards the flames of the sun. This is no doubt because shadow and light are the two seemingly contradictory aspects of a single essential reality.

Could the Cathars’ dualism be a false dualism?

I returned to Montségur four years later. I had no reason not to return and not to climb to the top. But this time, as I climbed, I did so slowly, cautiously, stopping at every landing, at every oddity in the terrain, to *turn round* and look at the path I had just travelled, how it looked, the distance separating me from the bottom.

Inside the castle, there was no breeze. And there was no one there. On that autumn morning, the sun was gentle, caressing, familiar. To the north, a wisp of mist hung in the air. To the south, the vast mass of the Pyrenees blended into a sky that was still very pale. The stone of the walls bore the hues of days gone by, and up there, on the platform, I could gaze at the horizon and the gigantic ravines into which I had no fear of plunging. The expanse unfolding beneath me was mine. And the village of Montségur offered me its red roofs as a call to rest and the peaceful calm of life, far removed from the turmoil and storms that shake the world. I knew that somewhere in these mountains there existed a haven of peace where I might find the traveller’s sleep.

But I had also realised that one must always look back when venturing along unknown paths: it is by carefully noting the path taken that one gains the full benefit of any quest, because what matters, ultimately,

is not the mysterious object that glimmers behind a screen of mist, but the quest itself that leads there…

II

MONTSÉGUR CASTLE

The spell cast by Montségur, whatever its intensity, stems from two main causes: on the one hand, the fortress bearing this name is situated in a truly remarkable location; on the other hand, it was the scene of a historical tragedy whose grey areas are sufficiently significant to give rise to the wildest fantasies. To this, one must also add the specific motivations of all those interested in Montségur and the Cathars, who, in all likelihood, are not seeking the same thing there.

The fortress of Montségur stands on a *pog*, that is to say on a *puy* (*pech* or *puig*), a term once thought to derive from *the* Latin *podium* (high place) but which, in reality, dates back much further, to pre-Celtic times, it seems, and which is found in the French *word pic*.

That said, the fortress does not occupy the entire Montségur *hill*. The *hill* itself is a huge block of limestone, approximately one kilometre long and between three and five hundred metres wide. Its highest point is 1,218 metres. This rocky mass juts out from the Tabe massif (which some insist on calling Thabor), a range formed by the Monts d'Olmes, the Monts de la Frau (1,925 metres), the peaks of Saint-Barthélémy (2,348 metres) and Soularac (2,368 metres). From this summit, the view is breathtaking in every direction, and one can understand why the site has been occupied since the earliest antiquity: it constituted, even more than a 'safe mountain', a

true ‘lookout’, a privileged observation post from which it was possible to survey the surrounding countryside.

But the height was not the only favourable factor. The site’s exceptional layout makes this *hilltop* a natural fortress, of which the castle was, in the end, merely one feature among many. Indeed, this rock is virtually inaccessible, except on the southern slope where it slopes down to meet a base that irregularly encircles the summit, some 150 metres below. Elsewhere, cliffs 60 to 80 metres high form defences just as effective as built walls. To the east of the fortress, which is the most impressive side, the summit platform extends into a very narrow ridge, only a few metres wide, which needed no fortification as it is naturally protected by formidable vertical cliffs some hundred metres high. It was at the end of this ridge that an outpost of Montségur’s defences was situated: the famous barbican which, during the siege of 1244, was stormed in the dead of night—not without terrible losses—by Basque mercenaries in the service of the Inquisitors. It was from this occupied barbican that they would bombard, using a catapult, the walls and the interior of the castle, thereby bringing about the garrison’s subsequent surrender and the tragedy with which we are all familiar.

It is always the Cathar history that sticks in the memory. Yet this overlooks the fact that the site originally had nothing to do with the heretics, and that the Cathar period at Montségur lasted only around forty years. Excavations carried out regularly on the *hilltop* since the beginning of this century, but particularly since 1956, have revealed very different periods in the occupation of the site. Firstly, it is necessary to correct a common misconception: the castle ruins, as they are seen today, are not those of the castle besieged by the Inquisitors; at the very least, they do not entirely correspond to what it was. After the siege of 1244, in fact, the fortress was occupied by a garrison

royal, and it was built at the end of the 13th century, as were all the so-called Cathar castles in the region. They were such strategic points in an insecure region, and close to the Catalan borders, that it would have been unthinkable not to use them, even if it meant modifying them to make them even more secure.

Furthermore, it must be said that the overall layout of the fortress dates from the very early 13th century; this is indisputable, even if certain anomalies give rise to various speculations. But it is absolutely impossible to say *what the building looked like before the year 1200*. And here we have a piece of information that is certainly of interest: in the 12th century, Montségur does not appear on the list of fortresses in the fief of Mirepoix, which was then attached to the county of Foix. This proves that before the Cathars settled there, around 1206, there were nothing but ruins on the *hilltop* of Montségur.

For human settlement on the site dates back much further. Excavations have revealed, to the north of the fortress but still on the plateau, the ruins of a proper village. However, as the site is cramped, settlement took place vertically, with successive civilisations building their settlements on top of the older structures. And as the medieval occupation was by far the most significant, it is difficult to define precisely what belongs to one period or another.

However, prehistoric remains have been found, specifically from the Neolithic period: a sharp arrowhead of the Late Chasséen type (3000–2000 BCE), as well as small blades, a striker, and a piercing arrowhead of the Chalcolithic type (2000–1800 BCE). In any case, the Montségur region was heavily populated by prehistoric peoples. Significant traces of civilisation have been discovered, particularly in the caves of Las Morts, Le Tuteil, and the Morenci range, not to mention the group of caves in the upper valley of

the Ariège region, around Ussat-les-Bains, a site prized for its hot springs, which was once the centre of a significant settlement. As for the Bronze Age and the Celtic Iron Age, these periods are also evidenced by a fairly large number of remains of shelters and burial sites in the vicinity.

Roman occupation of the Montségur site is likely, but apart from a bronze coin from the 3rd century AD, there is a lack of documentary evidence: it is true that the Romans rarely settled on the heights, preferring to establish their camps and watchposts in the valleys, in places where they could easily control the roads, which were very rare in the mountains. In fact, it was at the end of the Roman Empire, and with the arrival of the Visigoths, that the Montségur region seems to have gained some significance.

It is well known that the Visigoths left an indelible mark on much of Occitania. Between Narbonne and Agen, the Rouergue and the Périgord, the Pyrenees (excluding Cerdagne) and the Comminges, they occupied a vast territory. These Visigoths, who arrived from Sweden in several waves, were far from being 'Barbarians' in the sense that we are led to believe: firstly, they were no more cruel than any other peoples of that era, and secondly, whilst they sometimes destroyed towns, they rebuilt others and established a brilliant civilisation there, as evidenced by archaeological findings. Thus they formed the famous Septimania, which later became the Razès, soon divided into three counties: Carcassonne, Narbonne and the Razès proper, that is to say, Rennes-le-Château or Rennes-les-Bains. Within this Visigothic administration, the seigneury of Mirepoix, encompassing the Montségur region, was already taking shape. Following the Muslim invasions and the reconquest of the country by the Franks, the feudal structure emerged: the county of Foix came into being, and the seigneury of Mirepoix—and thus Montségur—was attached to it.

In this early Middle Ages, the lives of the inhabitants of Montségur must have been similar to those of all who had settled in the mountains: apart from livestock farming and a vague

crafts; what else could they have done in this poor, yet not inhospitable, land—a place, in truth, more suited to hiding than to engaging in profitable activities? If a Cathar community had not come to settle on the *hilltop*, whether to seek refuge there, to meditate in solitude or to perform their rituals, no one would be speaking of Montségur today, and the castle ruins would not be standing there, raising their enigmatic call to the heavens *in a language we do not even understand.*

So, at the beginning of the 13th century, the Cathars began to settle on the *hilltop* of Montségur. Small houses were built on the northern slope, forming a proper village. One of these houses belonged to a woman named Forneira, who was the mother of the local lord, Ramon de Perella, one of the vassals of Ramon-Roger, Count of Foix. This was a time when heresy was gaining ground throughout the Languedoc, protected by the Count of Toulouse, Raymond VI. But the Cathars sense danger approaching from the north: the King of France's claims on Occitan lands are becoming more explicit, and they know that Philip Augustus will seize upon the slightest pretext to deploy his troops and thus proceed with the annexation of a country that stands in the way of the Capetian monarchy. This pretext was readily at hand: the Albigensian heresy, which undermined official teachings and, above all, harmed the clergy of the region, abandoned by their faithful. Philip Augustus sought the Pope's authorisation to launch a crusade to halt the spread of the heresy.

So the Cathar leaders asked Ramon de Perella to fortify the ruins of Montségur. Ramon had the fortress rebuilt, knowing full well that a showdown was inevitable. In 1206, Esclarmonde, the sister of the Count of Foix, received the *consolamentum*, the supreme sacrament—indeed, the only sacrament of the Cathars— affirming thus her adherence to the 'Perfects' amongst the 'Believers'. It was at this same time that a Spaniard, Dominic de Guzman, who would become the famous Saint Dominic, settled in Fanjeaux, right in the heart of

of a region he had been tasked with converting to orthodox doctrine. Then, in 1206, came the assassination of Pierre de Castelnau, the papal legate, and this assassination served as a pretext for Pope Innocent III to call for a crusade. The die was cast. Simon de Montfort, at the head of the royal troops, ravaged the country and achieved undeniable successes. But whilst Cathar Occitania seemed lost, the fortress of Montségur remained unassailed, and increasing numbers of 'Believers' came to settle there. In 1213, the defeat at Muret sounded the death knell for free Occitania, and at the same time for the Cathars' peace. From then on, to survive, they would have to hide and try to escape the fearsome agents of the Inquisition, that enormous machine for oppressing consciences and burning bodies, which had been entrusted to the Order of Saint Dominic, under the authority of the Holy See. Simon de Montfort died in 1218, Saint Dominic in 1221, and Raymond VI of Toulouse in 1222. His son, Raymond VII, was excommunicated in 1226 because he showed too much tolerance towards the Cathars and expressed a desire to reclaim all the territories that the northern Crusaders had begun to take from him. However, in 1229, the Count of Toulouse was forced to submit under the terms of the treaty signed at Meaux between him and Louis IX—in reality, between him and Blanche of Castile, who held the reins of the royal government during her son's minority.

The Treaty of Meaux dealt a severe blow to Catharism: even though Raymond VII was clearly playing a double game, he was forced to sacrifice certain heretics who were too conspicuous in order to save others. The Cathars, who were generally very well accepted by the population—even the Catholic population—because they represented resistance to the French occupation, had to organise themselves. In 1232, at the instigation of the deacon Guillabert de Castres, they held an important synod. During this meeting, they officially asked Ramon de Perella, who was not one of them but who protected them, to agree to the settlement in the village of all Cathars wishing to seek refuge there, as well as to the reinforcement of the defences of the castle. Ramon de Perella

He hesitates: he knows that by agreeing to the Cathars' demands, he is placing himself outside the law and risks turning the Church and the King of France against him. But he has confidence in the position of *the hilltop fortress* of Montségur, which is considered impregnable. He eventually agrees and orders the fortifications and garrison to be reinforced.

It must be said that the Cathars had the means to pay their share of these defensive preparations. They possessed a vast treasure, the origin of which remains somewhat mysterious, and they stored it in the castle's cellars. They paid Perella handsomely and contributed to the garrison's upkeep.

Montségur thus became the true beacon of Catharism, the 'synagogue of Satan', as some chroniclers of the time put it. Numerous pilgrims flocked there from all over Occitania to listen to the sermons of the 'good men'. What is surprising is that the king's seneschals made no attempt to seize Montségur before the defences were reinforced, nor did they take any serious action against the pilgrims. It seems that Blanche of Castile, for reasons that elude us, wished in practice to spare the Cathars whilst loudly proclaiming the need to destroy them. The regent's attitude towards Raymond VII is far from **clear**[1].

However, Raymond VII, in an awkward position, had to offer assurances to both the royal authority and the papacy. Admittedly, he regularly protested against the Inquisition's activities on his estates: he knew full well that the bishops and priests of the local clergy were far less severe than the brothers of Saint Dominic in their fight against heretics, and he aided the latter in this way. He also secured the suspension of the Inquisition in his territories for four years, from 1237 to 1241, which constituted a relative success. But, in return, he had to show himself to be severe towards

[1] For Blanche of Castile's strange concessions to the Count of Toulouse, see J. Markale, *The Oak of Wisdom: A King Named Saint Louis*, Hermès, Paris, 1985.

certain ‘good men’ who were too conspicuous: he was thus forced to summon the Albigensian deacon Johan Cambitor from Montségur, along with three other heretics, and have them condemned to the stake in Toulouse.

It was then that Guillabert de Castres died, in 1240. This prominent figure of Catharism had become the stuff of legend: it was said that he had administered the *consolamentum* and preached in several hundred towns and villages right under the noses of the Inquisitors, and no doubt with the protection of the Count of Toulouse. Guillabert de Castres, the true leader of the Cathar religion, was succeeded by Bertrand d’en Marti. And a year later, increasingly cornered, Raymond VII was forced to promise King Louis IX that he would destroy the castle of Montségur. He laid siege to it, but, of course, this came to nothing: the siege was purely symbolic, and indeed the fortress appeared impregnable.

We can get an idea of what Montségur might have been like at that time thanks to written documents, in particular the accounts of chroniclers, and above all through the systematic study of the site, as revealed by the most recent excavations.

The castle itself is only part of the defensive system: it occupies a small area compared to the entire *hilltop*. It is merely the central part of a vast complex, covering the entire rocky outcrop, bordered by cliffs of varying steepness all around its perimeter. When one looks closely at this spur from the top of the walls, one realises that the entire plateau has been developed. It is, of course, the military structures that are most easily identified. Apart from the castle, which is the highest point, one can see the defences on the southern slope, which is the most exposed due to the relative ease of access one can experience today. There are also advanced defences on the northern slope, which are barely visible as they are currently hidden beneath the vegetation. To the east, an outpost that could monitor the exit from the Carroulet Gorges

was flanked, a little further north, by the Roc de la Tour watchtower, which allowed control of the entrance to the same gorges. The village itself lay between the castle, on the northern slope, and the defensive works that protected its outskirts. To the east and west, the mountains were sufficient to isolate the settlement. It was in this village that the community of the Perfect Ones and the Believers was established. It is indeed inconceivable that these people, who devoted themselves to meditation and intellectual speculation, could have lived inside the fortress: within it were the mercenary soldiers of Ramon de Perella, and it was only in times of danger that the Cathars took refuge inside the walls.

The castle covers an area of approximately seven hundred square metres. At its centre lay a small, open-air paved courtyard measuring around one hundred square metres. Surrounding this courtyard, spread over three storeys, were buildings serving various purposes, including shops, workshops, armouries and storerooms. Three staircases provided access to the parapet walk and the defences at the gateways. It was in this part of the castle that the men-at-arms brought by Ramon de Perella resided, and who, at the time of the siege, were commanded by Pierre-Roger de Mirepoix. It is generally estimated that there were one hundred and fifty men-at-arms, but most of them had brought their families with them, as was customary, which undoubtedly increased the population. There were also stables, as horses and mules could reach the castle via a specially constructed path. We know that the horses were very small in size and were perfectly suited to the steep mountain paths. Excavations show that the garrison's men were equipped with a comprehensive arsenal: lances, javelins, daggers and short swords, sling projectiles and arrows. Large stone cannonballs, weighing between 60 and 80 kilos, have also been found; these were quarried on site and used as projectiles for siege engines such as trebuchets.

The duties of these soldiers were quite varied. They kept watch over the defences, maintained or repaired the fortifications, escorted supply convoys, or were assigned to guard particular individuals leaving or returning to the site. Outside of their duties, they must have spent their time playing dice: indeed, numerous bone and ivory dice have been found during the excavations.

The eastern platform of the castle forms the thickest part of the walls, at 4.20 metres, which is considerable. This section, entirely covered with battlements, was both the most suitable spot for surveillance and the very centre of the defence.

To the west, or rather to the north-west, stood the keep and a vast cistern. This was fed by water collected from the roofs via stone or terracotta pipes; an overflow channel supplied the village situated on the terrace below the keep. It is estimated that this cistern could hold fifty cubic metres of water.

The lower chamber of the keep had five slits for light. Four of these slits are arranged in pairs facing one another, and are oriented towards the sunrise on the summer solstice. This feature, as one might expect, provides a strong argument for those who see the fortress of Montségur as a *solar temple*, but it is only one argument: there are many other buildings whose architecture takes account of the solstice sunrise, without there being any need to see a religious motivation of any kind in them. However, as the entire structure also takes account of the winter solstice sunrise, we cannot automatically dismiss this hypothesis of a solar temple combined with a remarkably effective defence system.

In this lower hall, a door led to a spiral staircase ascending to a floor lit by four large windows. This was where the lord’s quarters were situated. This floor featured a large fireplace set against the south wall, and

was connected to the main building via a single entrance. The whole structure was covered with terraces and tiles. However, within this complex architecture, nothing is truly distinctive. The construction took into account, above all, the characteristics of the terrain, and the work carried out following the siege of 1244 distorts the picture we have of the Cathar castle itself.

On the southern slope, three chicanes were built along the path leading up to the castle. This path, a few metres from the fortress, is carved into the rock and forms a sort of 'donkey-step' staircase with around twenty steps. The south gate is particularly large, measuring 1.95 m by 3.25 m, and was protected by machicolations, that is, wooden galleries mounted on top of the walls to defend the entrance. These battlements rested on 'corbels', i.e. projecting stones used to support the ends of the beams. These 'corbels' are still visible today. Access to the threshold was via a series of wooden platforms, some of which were removable, proving that this gate—the most vulnerable—was constructed to provide the best possible defence.

Sheltered by this imposing mass, the inhabitants of Montségur—the Cathars—lived in a settlement that stretched from the foot of the castle up onto part of *the hilltop*. During the early 13th century, the village's most important quarter surrounded the keep. Recent excavations have uncovered, over an area of six hundred square metres and across five levels, three dwellings, complete with their outbuildings and communication networks. Adjacent to one of these dwellings was a cistern for the water supply. These wooden and stone structures are connected by narrow staircases. They are interlocked with one another, and every flat surface appears to have been utilised. It is even likely that further flat surfaces were created, either by filling in the ground or by carving into the rock, to build dwellings. There are around fifty dwellings of this type in

the old village of Montségur. After the siege of 1244, the few remaining inhabitants, and perhaps some newcomers, settled further down, at the foot of *the hill*, at a place known as *Prat de la Gleiso*, below the current car park, and it was only after the Wars of Religion that they came to settle on the site that is now the village of Montségur, above the Carroulet Gorges, sheltered from the north winds and closer to the fertile lands of the valley.

For life on the Montségur *hilltop* was no easy matter. In winter, dwellings were heated by simple fires lit amongst stones, with the smoke escaping through a hole in the roof or through the door. The built-in chimney, which did not appear until the 11th century, was not yet widespread, and in Montségur, only the great hall of the keep had one.

The furnishings in the dwellings were very basic, consisting of a straw mattress, chests, stools and benches. Wooden doors with iron locks were used to secure the rooms. Lighting was provided by candles and oil lamps of the *calèlh* type, that is to say, four-spouted lamps made of iron. The tableware consisted of jugs, various earthenware vessels, drinking glasses and knives. Every dwelling had at least one small cistern.

One might wonder how these people, isolated on a barren and resource-poor mountain, managed to survive. In fact, their livelihood was provided mainly by livestock farming, which was possible on the slopes, and by meagre agriculture. Nor should we overlook hunting and fishing in the nearby streams. Furthermore, Montségur never lacked supplies from outside, even during the most difficult periods of the siege: communication with the outside world was always possible. The problem of water remained, and it was this problem that led to the surrender.

Archaeological finds suggest that the diet consisted mainly of cereals, wheat and rye. Numerous bones of cattle, sheep, roe deer, wild boar,

geese and chickens, as well as fragments of fish bones. It is likely that the meat was preserved by salting or smoking, and that there was always an abundance of it in the stores. Whilst the food was not of the highest quality, it was more than sufficient, and the chronicles of the siege make no mention of famine.

The Cathars who settled there did not spend all their time in meditation or religious practices. They engaged in essential practical activities, alongside their pastoral and agricultural life. They made clothes from sheep's wool and animal hides, and even produced the vegetable and mineral dyes needed to colour these garments. They spun the wool using spindles. They cut and sewed using iron scissors and bronze thimbles. They made buckles and belt studs. They did not neglect decorative items, such as pendants, rings and pectoral crosses, as well as toiletries, notably tweezers which were essential for removing splinters and thorns. And, of course, we must not overlook purely religious or simply symbolic objects, such as those famous lead tokens, which presumably served as identification tokens for attending secret meetings, or those mysterious pentagrams, the exact meaning of which remains far from clear.

One might be tempted to view Montségur as a kind of monastic settlement: protected by the fortress and the garrison stationed there, the Cathars in the village itself are said to have led a life similar to that of monks in the Catholic Church. This is far from the truth. Firstly, a distinction must be made between two categories of Cathars: the 'Perfects' and the 'Believers'. The 'Perfects' were those who had attained a high degree not only of initiation but also of 'purity' of life. Having received the *consolamentum* at their own request, they may be regarded as the only true Cathars. Practising austerity, abstinence sexual the vegetarianism, they were, according to the

Cathar believers, ready to return to the kingdom of God without needing to be reincarnated once more to purify themselves and free themselves from the bondage of matter, a satanic creation. They were forbidden to bear arms or perform work considered degrading, and they devoted themselves to meditation, preaching and religious practices. The Believers, on the other hand, were not bound by such austerity because they had not attained the same degree of wisdom and
'purity'. They knew they would have to be reborn in order to complete their initiation and purify themselves entirely. They were therefore not subject to exactly the same prohibitions, particularly regarding food and sex. However, out of respect for life, no Cathar had – in theory – the right to bear arms or wage war.

However, at Montségur, the undeniable military character of the site suggests that a large proportion of the occupants were not Cathars. Furthermore, the animal bones found there suggest that not all the inhabitants were vegetarians. Moreover, the Perfects and the Believers took part in active life, and there was no fundamental distinction in their daily lives. All this shows that at Montségur, in the early 13th century, there was a heterogeneous Cathar community more akin to the Celtic Christian monasteries of Ireland than to the Cistercian abbeys of the time. Moreover, religious significance was inextricably linked to political significance. Whilst it is possible that, around 1240, Montségur was regarded as a Cathar capital, it is quite certain that it was considered the focal point, the true symbol, of Occitan resistance to Capetian colonisation. Hence the events that led to the tragedy of 1244.

It is known that in 1241, Raymond VII of Toulouse had been forced to reaffirm to the King of France his allegiance to the monarchy and his determination to continue the fight against heresy. He had even laid siege to the *fort*, though without pressing the matter too hard, which enabled him to tell the king's envoys and the Inquisitors that it was a futile endeavour to try to capture Montségur.

Raymond VII was a master of double-dealing. He was merely biding his time, waiting for a favourable opportunity to drive out the French troops and reclaim all his lands. Moreover, as he had no legitimate male heir, he tried by every means to have his marriage to Sancha of Aragon—who was barren—annulled, so that he might marry a woman who would bear him a son. But Louis IX and Blanche of Castile are stepping up their efforts to prevent him from entering into a new marriage: the plan is already in place: Raymond's daughter, Jeanne of Toulouse, will marry Alphonse of Poitiers, brother of Saint Louis, which will sooner or later bring the County of Toulouse under the influence of the royal family.

In these circumstances, Raymond VII sought to buy time. Undoubtedly, he made use of the Cathars by offering them protection, both because they were enemies of the King of France and because, in the eyes of the predominantly Catholic population, they represented resistance to oppression from the north. Raymond VII would have aided any heretical sect provided it had expressed its disagreement with royal policy. And, in 1242, he was the driving force behind a vast conspiracy that brought together the eternal opponent of Blanche of Castile, Hugh of Lusignan, Count of La Marche, Henry III Plantagenet, King of England *and Duke of Aquitaine*, the Counts of Foix, Comminges, Armagnac and Rodez, as well as the Viscounts of Narbonne and Béziers. Almost the whole of Occitania formed part of this still-secret coalition, and Emperor Frederick II, delighted to cause difficulties for the Capetian monarchy, was its shrewd accomplice.

Unfortunately for the Occitans, and of course for the Cathars themselves, the revolt was to break out too soon, triggered by a tragedy that appeared to be a minor incident, but which may well have been the result of a deliberate provocation orchestrated by the royal government. Indeed, Louis IX and Blanche of Castile had their informants, not to say their spies, throughout the county of Toulouse. These had not failed to warn their masters that something serious was afoot. We might therefore put forward the following hypothesis: from the perspective of

Paris, the revolt was intended to break out as soon as possible, before the conspirators had fully organised themselves, in order to justify a swift intervention by the royal troops and to make this intervention more effective due to the opponents' lack of preparation. There is a lack of evidence, but the hypothesis holds water because it appears to be supported by the events that followed.

It is May 1242. In Avignonnet, a small village in the Lauragais region situated on the lands of the Count of Toulouse, two inquisitors, Brother Arnaud Guilhem of Montpellier and Brother Étienne of Narbonne, have set up their tribunal. They are staying at Avignonnet Castle, commanded by Ramon d'Alfaro, *bayle* (that is to say, bailiff) to Raymond VII. Ramon d'Alfaro sends a messenger to Pierre-Roger de Mirepoix, commander of the garrison at Montségur, to warn him of the presence of the two inquisitors, who have made a name for themselves through their fanaticism and cruelty. In Montségur, the reaction is immediate: many Cathars and soldiers from the garrison have a relative who has been mistreated or burned by the two inquisitors in question. Around fifty knights and men-at-arms gather and set off for Avignonnet. As they passed through, sympathisers who, too, had a relative to avenge, joined their ranks. The expedition was, in fact, far from secret: everyone knew that this group was determined to massacre the Inquisitors. But, curiously, no one was found to warn the future victims. This only reinforces the theory of provocation.

It was Ramon d'Alfaro himself who met the conspirators and led them into the castle, to the rooms where Brother Arnaud and his companions were sleeping. A massacre ensued, with everyone eager to take part in this 'purge'. All the members of the tribunal, including the notary and the bailiffs, were killed. In case the Inquisitors had managed to escape, groups of horsemen were waiting for them on the roads leading out of Avignonnet. They could therefore not escape Cathar 'justice'. The men of Montségur set off back to their fortress, and as soon as the news spread, the whole of Occitania

rose up in revolt. And Raymond VII occupied Albi, which the King of France had previously denied him.

The royal authorities' response was extremely violent. The papacy demanded an exemplary punishment, and the situation had to be exploited to put a definitive end to anything standing in the way of the annexation of the County of Toulouse. A series of ill-prepared battles revealed that the Occitans had acted too hastily. Furthermore, following some shady dealings, the Count of Foix defected, and soon Raymond VII, defeated on the battlefield and abandoned by his allies, found himself forced, once again, to beg for forgiveness from King Louis IX. The king did not believe a word of the Count of Toulouse's expressions of repentance, but Raymond had taken care to address not him directly, but the Queen Mother Blanche of Castile. She, though irritated by her Occitan cousin's behaviour, compelled Louis IX to come to terms with him, leaving him the county that her son had wished to confiscate.

This behaviour on the part of Blanche of Castile remains inexplicable and raises many questions. One might wonder whether Raymond VII did not possess some secret means of exerting pressure to secure royal leniency in this way, despite being excommunicated and a declared rebel, and thus liable to have his estates confiscated. In any case, we know that Queen Blanche left a curious legacy in the popular memory of the Cathar regions, particularly in the Razès, where a mysterious treasure is attributed to her. It is true that the queen's name, Blanche, overlaps here with the widespread belief throughout the Pyrenees in the existence of 'white ladies', that is to say, fairy women, who reign over the underground world of the caves, which are very numerous in this region.

Be that as it may, the massacre of the Inquisitors at Avignonnet provoked a bloody reprisal. Montségur, from whence the assassins came, then truly became the 'synagogue of Satan', and it seems clear that, from that moment on, every effort was made, on the part of both the Catholic clergy and the

royal authority, to seize the fortress and destroy, both physically and symbolically, everything it stood for. Louis IX hoped to 'win back' Raymond VII, all the more so as he needed brave and experienced knights to lead into the Holy Land: he agreed with Blanche of Castile, who wished to spare the Count of Toulouse. But whilst the king may be able to forgive, or at least show magnanimity, the Church has no reason to forget the massacre of its Inquisitors. For the Church, Montségur must be destroyed. But to achieve this, they cannot rely on Raymond VII. It was preferred to let him go to Rome, giving him the opportunity to plead his case before the Pope and secure the lifting of the excommunications imposed upon him. His absence was beneficial. The opportunity was seized to entrust the mission of 'beheading the dragon' to a trusted man: and so Hugues des Arcis, the seneschal of Carcassonne, was chosen.

Under the Treaty of Lorris, signed in January 1243, Raymond VII of Toulouse was forced to acknowledge his defeat and that of Occitania as a whole. He was granted a pardon, but on very harsh terms: in particular, he had to pledge in writing to punish the murderers of Avignonnet, to sever all ties with the Emperor, and to besiege all the fortresses harbouring Cathars. The Count of Toulouse signed.

In May 1243, an army numbering ten thousand men—a figure that is surprising, given both the era and the mountainous terrain of the region—began to assemble around Montségur, under the command of the Seneschal of Carcassonne and under the theoretical spiritual authority of Pierre Amiel, Archbishop of Narbonne. A long siege lasting a year was about to begin.

The army took its time and set up camp, forming a sort of ellipse all around the mountain, except on the eastern side, where a very deep gorge, carved out by a torrent flowing from the Tabe massif, offered terrain too steep to be used. The various encampments were at irregular levels, with a difference in elevation of four to five hundred metres

can separate them, on the south-eastern slope, from the encampments on the opposite side. In front of all the posts, there are vertical cliffs that are virtually impossible to scale and also pose a risk of surprise attack. Above, on the *hilltop*, the entire fortress and Cathar village is enclosed by a strong wooden palisade that skirts the precipices, leaving access points on either side which the most experienced of the besieged would use throughout the siege to communicate with the outside world. For the royal troops' front line was never impenetrable: it could not have been otherwise in this rugged, tormented landscape, which was itself elusive.

At the *Pog*, the undisputed leader is Bertrand d'en Marti, *the* Cathar *bishop* who succeeded Guillabert de Castres. But there is also Pierre-Roger de Mirepoix, who is not a Cathar but who is in overall command of all defensive operations. The garrison comprises knights and men-at-arms, the latter having brought their families with them. As there may have been around fifty 'Perfects', as many 'Perfects' and roughly two hundred 'Believers', this amounts to a population of about five hundred people on the *hilltop* of Montségur at the time of the siege.

At first, this siege appeared to be completely futile. Begun in May 1243, it had made no headway six months later. A few skirmishes took place on the less steep sections, but to no avail, as the nature of the terrain allowed a handful of men to successfully hold out against vastly superior numbers. It was then that the besiegers received reinforcements in the form of the Bishop of Albi, Durand, and a group of strategists skilled in the use of war machines. But, on the other side, the besieged received a recruit of choice, Bertrand de la Beccalaria, himself an expert in war machines, who had come from Capdenac and was putting his knowledge at the service of the Cathar cause. On both sides, the forces were, in short, evenly matched. But the besiegers, convinced that an attack could only succeed if prepared by specialists and by

people who know all the secrets of the mountains, called upon Basque mercenaries.

In November 1243, a group of these Basques managed to gain a foothold on the southern slope, 150 metres below the fortress. It was an uncomfortable position, but it offered the potential to launch further operations, especially as they managed to hold their ground there firmly. A trebuchet was set up which, despite its position below, managed to hurl a few stone balls into the castle's eastern barbican. It was in this direction, moreover, that the besiegers' efforts would be focused. During the night, at the end of December, a group of lightly armed volunteers made their way up the southern cliffs, beneath the rocky spur that marks the eastern end of *the hill*. They were led by a guide who knew the secret paths and who was, in all likelihood, a renegade Cathar. They reached the ridge and slaughtered the guards of the barbican. The Basques, who had been waiting, sheltered in their positions, then intervened in turn, stormed the barbican, and, despite the fierce resistance of its defenders, succeeded in capturing it. It is said that, when the day came, the volunteers from the night-time expedition shuddered with horror at the sight of the precipice along which they had crawled during the night without realising the danger they were in. It is added that they assured their comrades they would never have dared to venture there had they known the difficulty or been able to see the precipice.

The capture of the eastern barbican would turn the tide of the battle and considerably shorten the duration of the siege. Indeed, from this position—which allowed them to observe the enemy almost at the same level as the fortress—the men of the Bishop of Albi began erecting a huge stone-throwing machine, just eighty metres from the castle ramparts. This trebuchet enabled the firing of stone balls weighing between sixty and eighty pounds into the fortifications, causing considerable damage to both the roofs and the walls. The

situation, which until then had been rather favourable to the besieged, who were prepared to defy the royal forces for years, now turned to the advantage of the besiegers.

Pierre-Roger de Mirepoix, commander of the garrison at Montségur, no longer harbours any illusions about the future. He manages to persuade Bishop Bertrand d'en Marti to have the Cathar treasure evacuated. Thanks to the complicity of a few sentries from the royal army, who were simply bribed, a large quantity of gold and silver was thus transported to a fortified cave in the upper Ariège valley, and subsequently to the castle of Usson, in the Donnézan. There, the treasure bearers attempted to recruit an elite force: the plan is to rush upon the Crusaders, break their ranks and storm Montségur via the eastern ridge after destroying the stone-throwing machine or turning it against the besiegers. An agreement is reached with a Catalan leader, a sort of highwayman, a man named Corbario, who takes charge of the operations. The attempt failed, mainly because Corbario's men lost their way in the dark of night, in the middle of the Lasset Gorge, unable to gain a foothold on the coveted position. And the Bishop of Albi's catapult continued to cause considerable damage.

On the first day of March 1244, the besieged, well-prepared and ready for anything, attempted a sortie. They were repelled. Pierre-Roger de Mirepoix realised that this situation could not last much longer. It was not that they were short of provisions, nor that there were no opportunities for trade with the outside world. At night, groups of men-at-arms broke through the royal army's blockade and, led by trusted guides, reached the fortress. Others bring messages to Bishop Bertrand d'en Marti. Weapons and even supplies can therefore be brought in. But the water problem is becoming a cause for concern: the cisterns are polluted because rats have fallen into them in great numbers. Indeed, it is thought that this is no accident, but an act of treachery, as a member of the garrison must have been

bribed to carry out this deed. It is therefore high time to take decisions to avert the worst.

Everyone is informed of the true situation: the Cathars place their trust in Ramon de Perella and Pierre-Roger de Mirepoix, granting them full authority to negotiate an honourable surrender. The two leaders send a messenger to the seneschal of Carcassonne to ask under what conditions they might agree to surrender Montségur.

The siege has lasted for nearly a year. The commanders of the royal troops are exasperated by its length. They also know that they will never be able to storm the fortress. Hugues des Arcis, Archbishop Pierre Amiel and the Inquisitor Ferrier accept most of the conditions set by the besieged. All those who surrender will have their lives spared and will not be harmed if they agree to a sincere confession of their sins. They will leave with their weapons and belongings, and no punishment will be meted out for their involvement in the attack on Avignonnet. The besieged are given a period of fifteen days, and they must surrender on 16 March.

This deadline raises a question: why such leniency? One hypothesis has been put forward: perhaps to allow the Cathars to celebrate one last time a solar festival, probably of Manichaean origin, at the spring equinox. But it seems surprising that the victors, so relentless in their fight against heresy, could have shown such tolerance. Moreover, this other act of leniency—allowing anyone who confessed their sins to go free—was in reality a formidable trap: the victors knew full well that true Cathars, particularly the 'Perfects', would not renounce their faith and would prefer to die at the stake.

On the night before the surrender, Pierre-Roger de Mirepoix helped four Parfaits to escape; he had previously separated them from the others and hidden them in the castle's underground passages. He lowered them down using ropes along the great western face of the mountain. Who were these four men? Probably Cathars who knew certain secrets, perhaps

the location of the treasure, or at least some 'missionaries' tasked with perpetuating the doctrine. Unless they took documents with them to place them in a safe place. In any case, it is understandable that this escape, at the last moment, under implausible circumstances, and with all the mystery that this implies surrounding the event, could have given rise to so many hypotheses, and also so many interpretations without evidence. There is also talk of an underground glacier on the mountain opposite Montségur: the fugitives are said to have buried documents or a treasure in this glacier, which recedes every year; one need only wait patiently for the moment when the ice returns what was entrusted to it. But that may take a long time.

So, on 16 March 1244, the inhabitants of Montségur left the summit of *the hill*. Two hundred and five Cathars refused to recant their beliefs and remained steadfast in their faith. Among them were, of course, Bishop Bertrand d'en Marti, but also women, notably Esclarmonde de Perella, the daughter of the local lord, her mother Corba de Perella, and her grandmother, Marquésia de Lantar. The pyre was immediately erected, perhaps on what is known as the *Prat del Cramats* (Meadow of the Burned), where the memorial stands. But the exact location is uncertain. Be that as it may, the pyre was lit and the 'heretics' rushed towards it singing, like people who were certain they would return to their original purity, when Evil had not yet disrupted the course of the world.

A few weeks later, in Paris, King Louis IX – whom we call Saint Louis – was informed of the capture of Montségur and the subsequent auto-da-fé. He was also told that Gui II de Levis had taken possession of the stronghold in the king's name and had established a garrison of loyal men there. For Louis IX, that was what mattered: to possess, in the very heart of a suspect land, an impregnable fortress where his authority could be asserted. The rest—that is to say, the heretics who were burned—was merely a police operation, and it was not the first time such an event had occurred. Moreover, his conscience was

at ease: the heretics had been given a choice regarding their fate, and if they had preferred to die, that was their own responsibility. Such was the harsh law of the time, and no one took offence at it, not even the Cathars, for whom contempt for the world was a rule of life.

We tend to overlook this aspect of the problem a little too much. Back then, it was commonplace to burn people at the stake for their religious beliefs; the golden rule was to eliminate anything that was not orthodox, for the greater good of the majority of believers. It was merely an application of a passage from the Gospel: when a branch is rotten, it is cut off and burned; the survival of the rest of the tree is at stake. Never did the Inquisitors, apart from a few fanatics whose neuroses and sadism are well established, feel they were committing injustices by sending men and women to the stake after having them tortured. Different times, different customs. Moreover, had the Cathars dominated Occitania, they would probably have acted in the same way towards Catholics who refused to renounce their faith. We have seen what such an attitude can lead to, during the wars between Protestants and Catholics: tolerance existed on neither side. Violence, on the other hand, was present in both camps.

The stake at Montségur strikes us as an outrage. But we forget to mention that the Cathars who perished there *were happy*: the flames allowed them to attain the Perfection they had sought all their lives. Is it shocking to make this remark?

It is true that the pyre is still burning, as André Breton says in one of his poems. And it is far from dying out in our smoke-filled minds.

It is through him that Montségur has gone down in history. And also in legend. But what is the difference between history and legend?

III

QUÉRIBUS CASTLE

Montségur was not the only Cathar stronghold, and the pyre lit on 16 March 1244, whilst dealing a severe blow to the Occitan resistance, did not mark the end of Catharism. Moreover, another of these fortresses would hold out for eleven years after the fall of Montségur: an equally important and imposing fortress, that of Quéribus, much further east, on the border between Occitania and Catalonia, and thus in a border region whose history has always been as turbulent as its terrain.

Here, we are no longer in the Pyrenees, but in the Corbières. This is an arid mountain range, bounded to the north by the Aude valley and to the south by the Agly valley, forming a sort of buffer zone between the Massif Central and the Pyrenees. Here, the climate is Mediterranean, though this does not prevent it from being harsh in some winters. A land of vineyards, at least on the well-exposed slopes sheltered from the tramontane, it is nevertheless a
'barren land', to borrow the expression used in *The Quest for the Holy Grail* to describe the desolate country surrounding the Fisher King's castle: scree and scrub dominate the landscape, as if the wind and sun had joined forces to slowly and patiently destroy these arrogant rocky outcrops that the sky cannot bear.

It is atop one of the limestone outcrops of the southern barrier of the Corbières massif that Quéribus Castle stands, like a petrified ghost keeping watch

both the mountains and the sea. The rocky ridge that supports it, marking the boundary between the departments of Aude and Pyrénées-Orientales, stretches from east to west from Tautavel to Bugarach, in the county of Razès, another strange place where the memory of the earliest Cathars lingers. This ridge can currently be crossed via three passes, including the Grau de Maury, formerly known as the Grau de Quéribus, dominated on one side by the Roque de la Poucatière, which rises to 770 metres, and the Roc du Courbas, at 939 metres, and on the other by the imposing mass of the castle that once served as its gatekeeper. For this southern barrier of the Corbières is difficult to cross from north to south, and that is why it long formed a border between Languedoc and Catalonia, between France and Roussillon, as history books tell us.

To the north, the slopes of this rocky ridge—where the landscape alternates between sun-baked or frost-cracked rock, completely bare, and scrubland dotted with pines, thyme and rosemary—are bordered by the Cucugnan stream, a tributary of the Verdouble. It is indeed here that the village of Cucugnan is situated, famous ever since Alphonse Daudet – or rather since his 'ghostwriter' Paul Arène, who wrote *Lettres de mon moulin* for him – which people tend to place in Provence, forgetting that Daudet was from Languedoc. But after all, is not the well-known sermon by the priest of Cucugnan very much in the vein of the Inquisitors and the Preaching Friars who promised Hell to the followers of the dualist heresy?

To the south, the cliff is reminiscent of the precipices of Montségur. One feels the same sense of vertigo here. The slope plunges steeply down towards the River Maury, a tributary of the Agly, which has lent its name to a village and to the region that produces renowned wines. The landscape is magnificent, perhaps less imposing than around Montségur, perhaps less skyward-reaching, less in contact with the snow, but just as impressive, certainly more chaotic, more fragmented, in fact far more secretive. As you traverse the mountains, you may discover, here and there, in the small valleys or on the sheltered parts of the slopes,

abandoned or ruined sheepfolds, bearing witness to a thriving pastoral life in centuries past. And then there are the vines climbing as high as they can, the only current source of wealth in this impoverished region.

Yet people have always lived in the Corbières mountains. Archaeological excavations have revealed Upper Palaeolithic settlements along the Ver-double valley, at Tautavel and in the Grau de Padem caves, very close to the site of Quéribus. During the Megalithic period, there were also settlements, and a few remains have been reported, such as a menhir near Cucugnan, a menhir that has now disappeared, like so many other artefacts. And, during the Celtic Iron Age, the region was occupied by the Gallic tribe of the Volques Tectosages, who are believed to be the originators of the famous Occitan cross, later adopted by the Cathars and then by the Huguenots.

In Roman times, when the region became a province – Narbonensis – the heights of the Corbières provided excellent vantage points from which to observe events unfolding along the coast: it should not be forgotten that the Languedoc coast was a major migration route. Hannibal and his Carthaginians passed through here, coming from the south of the Iberian Peninsula and heading towards Italy. The Romans built the Via Domitia here, which secured their control over that very same Iberian Peninsula. As the Romans had discovered metal deposits in the Corbières, numerous secondary roads were laid out to facilitate their exploitation. Along these routes, one of which passed through Cucugnan, coming from Tuchan and heading towards Bugarach, numerous Gallo-Roman villas were built, of which substantial remains have been found.

Later, this Via Domitia served as the invasion route for the Visigoths, who, in 419, drove out the Romans. From there, the Visigoths spread out across what was to become Septimania, before being defeated by the Franks in 507. From then on, the Corbières became the northern border of the

. But Septimania soon fell into the hands of the Muslims, who were not driven out until 759 by Pepin the Short: at the beginning of the 9th century, the region of Peyrepertuse, which included the site of Quéribus, formed part of a large territory granted by Charlemagne to his cousin William, in reward for his victories over the Saracens.

But the region took poorly to Carolingian rule. The population was, in fact, very diverse, and the various peoples who had settled there had each left a deep mark. The Merovingian influence lingered in certain areas, and unrest broke out, prompting Charles the Bald to divide Septimania in two in order to bring it more effectively under control. In 865, it was therefore divided into Gothia proper and the Spanish March. In 874, this March became the appanage of Wilfrid the Hairy, Count of Barcelona, who shared suzerainty over the lands of Sault, Donnezan, Fenouillède, Peyrepertuse and the county of Razès with the lord of Carcassonne.

In 1020, the name Quéribus was mentioned for the first time in a written document, and in 1066, Béranger, Viscount of Narbonne, paid homage to Guilhem, Count of Bésalu, for the castle of Quéribus, the revenues from which his wife, Garsinde, had received as a dowry from her father, Bernard Taillefer. In the 12th century, through a series of inheritances and various alliances, Quéribus Castle became part of a large territorial complex under the control of four countly houses: Bésalu, Cerdagne, Barcelona and Provence. But due to the particular situation of this region, which was always a contested area disputed by various parties, the ruins had accumulated, and almost nothing remained of its former grandeur. It was therefore in a region stripped of its inhabitants and resources that, at the end of the 12th century, many Cathars came to seek refuge, fleeing the persecutions they were beginning to face.

But it was not until 1209 that the famous Albigensian Crusade began. On 22 July of that year, 1209, the inhabitants of Béziers were all massacred. The strongholds

held by the heretical rebels fell one after another under the onslaught of the troops commanded by Simon de Montfort. In August, Carcassonne surrendered. The following year, in July 1210, one hundred and fifty Cathars were exterminated at Minerve. In November, the castle of Termes was taken after a four-month siege. In 1211, it was the turn of the stronghold of Lavaur: the massacres became systematic. The defeat at Muret on 12 September 1213 marked the end of the First Crusade: the entire Cathar country was occupied, except for the Fenouillèdes and the Peyrepertusès, of which Quéribus forms part. The minor lords of the region were all Cathar sympathisers, but as such, they were officially stripped of their fiefs: they became what were known as
"faidits".

But the military crusade was definitively brought to an end by the Treaty of Meaux, signed in 1229. From then on, the fight against heresy – and for French control over Occitania, which was inseparable from it – was entrusted to the Inquisitors, who could at any time call upon the aid of royal troops and vassals ostensibly loyal to the King of France. In the Corbières, we then witnessed a patient whittling away at the last strongholds occupied by the Cathars or their sympathisers.

Quéribus was then under the command of Chevalier Chabert de Barbaira, a former military engineer to the King of Aragon, who, upon the death of Viscount Pierre de Fenouillet in 1242, was granted full military authority over the region's remaining independent castles. He was a man devoted to Cathar ideas who strove to protect those who had survived the burnings at the stake and the battles of the Crusade. In 1230, the Cathar bishop of Razès, Benoit de Termes, came to settle at Quéribus. He died there in 1241. A document from the period states that in Quéribus, one could encounter leading figures of the heresy, in particular the deacon Pierre Paraire, a certain Raymond de Narbonne, and another heretic named Bugaraig: this latter name appears to be connected with one of the most ly strange places in the southern of the Corbières, Bugarach, situated the summit

western peak of the southern ridge of the Corbières and likely a remnant of the Bulgars, or ‘Bougres’, who appear to be the ancestors of the Cathars of Occitania.

Naturally, in the aftermath of the fall of Montségur, Quéribus—which is an equally impregnable fortress—took on considerable importance and , emerging as a second
‘synagogue of Satan’. But no attempt is made against Quéribus. The seneschals of Carcassonne contented themselves with seizing less well-defended and less well-situated castles, such as Padern and Molhet in 1248, or Puylaurens and Saint-Paul de Fenouillet in 1250. However, the noose was inexorably tightening around Quéribus.

On his return from the crusade in 1255, Louis IX, wishing to secure a first-rate defensive belt around Carcassonne, decided to do everything in his power to bring Quéribus under royal control. He appointed Pierre d’Auteuil as seneschal of Carcassonne and entrusted him with the task of seeing the operation through to a successful conclusion.

The events that unfolded at that time are poorly understood and remain rather obscure: the texts concerning the siege and fall of Quéribus are rather vague and often contradictory. One thing is certain, however: in May 1255, Pierre d’Auteuil began to encircle the castle of Quéribus.

It is no easier than at Montségur. Quéribus is built on a sort of rocky outcrop which itself overlooks a steep ridge. Its natural defences are impressive: surrounded by open space, and effectively protected on the less steep side of the ridge by a massive keep, the fortress can withstand the efforts of a large army for a long time. Moreover, the seneschal had struggled to raise the necessary contingent for the campaign. It seems that the prelates of Languedoc refused to assist him, no doubt as a form of blackmail, as the clergy of the region were then in conflict with the king’s seneschals over sordid matters of material interest. Pierre d’Auteuil then sought assistance from the Archbishop of Narbonne. The latter did not reply. Pierre d’Auteuil sent a message to Louis IX to protest, but the king could do nothing else

than to order the seneschal of Beaucaire to go and come to the aid of his colleague in Carcassonne. The aid requested by Pierre d'Auteuil was prompted not by the siege itself, which required only a thousand well-deployed men, but by the threat posed by the King of Aragon, who had made it known that he would not hesitate to march through Languedoc with his army to reach Montpellier, where his subjects had revolted. However, the King of Aragon had always maintained excellent relations with the defender of Quéribus, Chabert de Barbaira. Finally, after much hesitation, the Archbishop of Narbonne sent reinforcements, 'because the castle of Quéribus is a refuge for heretics and thieves and thus this matter concerns the Church'.

But the conditions under which the siege is taking place are not favourable to the Seneschal of Carcassonne. On the one hand, he realises that he will never be able to overcome Chabert de Barbaira's resistance in his fortress, because it is impossible even to approach it, as at Montségur, to set up a catapult; on the other hand, he was concerned about what was happening on the other side of the Catalan border: stuck at Quéribus, he was leaving the field open to the King of Aragon's ventures. With the main danger lying elsewhere, Pierre d'Auteuil lifted the siege of Quéribus in September 1255, determined not to embark on another futile venture. Yet, by the end of the year, the fortress of Quéribus was officially returned to the King of France, who had – in theory – purchased it from its owner, Nuno Sanche, in 1239. So what had happened?

One theory is highly likely to present an accurate account of events, and this theory centres on Olivier de Termes, one of those who, alongside Raymond Trencavel, sparked the *Faidits'* revolt of 1239 in order to reclaim the lands that had been confiscated from them. Due to the hesitations of Raymond VII of Toulouse, the revolt had come to nothing: Trencavel and Olivier de Termes had been forced to surrender. And Olivier had definitively reconciled with the King of France, subsequently accompanying him on the Crusade and behaving there

as a hero. Enjoying the favour of Louis IX, and probably well paid, he had somewhat forgotten that he was the son of Raymond de Termes, who had died in the dungeons of the city of Carcassonne following the capture of his castle in 1211, during the First Albigensian Crusade. He had also forgotten that he was the nephew of the Cathar bishop Benoit de Termes, who had taken refuge at Quéribus and died in 1241.

In all likelihood, Olivier de Termes, who knew the Corbières mountains intimately having often harassed the royal troops there, lured Chabert de Barbaira into an ambush. Taken prisoner, Chabert de Barbaira exchanged his freedom and his life for the surrender of the fortress. A document states that he promised to observe the conditions imposed on him 'on pain of a fine of one thousand marks of silver, guaranteed by Philippe de Montfort and Pierre Voisins'. Subsequently, Chabert de Barbaira is mentioned three times in official documents, notably on 12 September 1278, during the signing of the partition of Andorra between the Bishop of Urgel and the Count of Foix. This proves that he had been restored to favour.

As for the Cathars who had taken refuge at Quéribus, it is not known what became of them, as no documents record their fate. It is, however, likely that, as the fortress of Quéribus was neither taken nor surrendered under the pressure of a siege, the Cathars scattered into the countryside, as they say, seeking to lie low, and perhaps emigrating to northern Italy. The 'last bastion of southern independence' had just fallen, without glory, but also without needless massacres. This is perhaps why Quéribus does not have the reputation of Montségur. For that to have happened, heretics would have had to be burned there.

Subsequently, under the authority of the King of France, the fortress became the linchpin of the entire defence system between Roussillon and France. In 1258, major works were undertaken there, which, as at Montségur, considerably distorts the view one might have of the Cathar building. In 1260, the garrison, small in number but effective, included a castellan

and ten sergeants-at-arms. In 1321, the walls were further extended and reinforced. In 1473, the castle was captured by the troops of the King of Aragon, who had come to liberate Roussillon from French occupation, but the stronghold was recaptured by the French in 1475. And it was in 1659, with the Treaty of the Pyrenees, which confirmed the annexation of Roussillon by France, that Quéribus lost all strategic importance. Occupied until 1789 by the Castéras Sournia family, the fortress would soon fall prey to the elements and memories.

It must be acknowledged, however, that Quéribus is not only impressive for its location – as remarkable as that of Montségur – but also enigmatic. It may not be solely because of its 'security' that the Cathars, as at Montségur, gathered there. Admittedly, as is the case with Montségur, it is impossible to arrive at any certainties, both due to the lack of written records and the alterations made to the original castle, but questions arise. And first and foremost, this seemingly mad desire to be situated on a mountaintop, in very harsh living conditions yet in contact with the heavens, would lend credence to the controversial and debatable theories put forward regarding the Cathars' 'solar temples'.

Quéribus is, of course, an 'eagle's nest', and as has been said, 'a falcon clinging firmly to the clenched fist of a rock'. The expression, coined by Gaston Mouly, is entirely apt, and besides, it is a lovely one. As one approaches the fortress, one feels all the more a sense of power and boldness because the architecture, as it appears at first glance, is of exemplary simplicity. A wide path climbs steadily up the northern slope of the mountain—the least steep—to a plateau bounded to the north-west by a wall that has now been levelled. From there, a staircase—partly carved into the rock, partly built of cut stone—crosses the remains of a first threshold and leads, through a series of chicanes, to the entrance of the fortress. And there, unlike at Montségur, there

three successive walls, arranged in tiers and dominated by the keep.

The lower enclosure consists of three sections. The first is designed to defend the access staircase and comprises a wall running north to south. The second, which runs east to west, protects the entrance, featuring a ‘shoot’ set into a recess in the inner facing and vaulted with a semicircular arch. A third wall runs eastwards, enclosing this first enclosure. Inside, a staircase follows the drop and leads into the second enclosure, formed by a gigantic wall, where the remains of a large rectangular hall can still be seen—probably a guard post—opposite which stood a cistern with its inner walls waterproofed by a pink plaster known as ‘tuileau mortar’.

This leads to the third enclosure, by far the largest, built of limestone, and housing several rooms as well as the imposing mass of the keep. On the left, upon entering, a long vaulted hall is lit to the south by a loophole and extended to the north-west by a watchtower that likely protected the first cistern. To the right, one can see a three-storey main building, generously lit to the south by numerous openings. Outside, on two different levels, there are two courtyards, and beneath a small room, a second cistern. At the far end, towards the south, stands the keep, one of the most remarkable of its kind in the whole of Occitania.

Indeed, within this keep, one finds everything necessary to ensure the effective defence of the castle, and indeed of the entire eastern slope of the mountain. But what is surprising is to find, at the very heart of the building, an architectural ensemble of great beauty: the famous ‘salle du pilier’, about which hypotheses as bold as they are varied have been put forward.

The first impression one gets is that of being inside a sanctuary. It is, in fact, a hall which today appears larger than it actually was, as it was

divided into two levels. But what is striking is this single, immense pillar soaring towards the summit, where it splits into four rib-vaulted arches – an unusual construction given the austerity of the surroundings. Light from outside enters through curious twin windows, which are in fact a single window whose cruciform mullion divides two lower rectangular windows and two upper pointed-arch windows. This window is set in a recess, and along the walls run two stone benches known as ‘coussièges’. The walls of the hall are seven metres wide.

It is not known whether this room served as a chapel. The grandeur of the place, with that pillar which irresistibly brings to mind a palm tree with irregular branches, would suggest so. But where would the altar have been? So, is this a Cathar sanctuary? Is it a place of esoteric worship? So many questions that remain unanswered. But it must be said that wherever the Cathars went, they left behind a strange legacy, and in any case elements ambiguous enough to spark the imagination…

But Montségur and Quéribus are not the only Cathar castles, or at least those said to be Cathar. Not far from Quéribus, still in the Corbières but further inland, on the other side of Cucugnan, lies Peyrepertuse. The very name of the castle bears witness to the unusual nature of a scrubland full of holes and bumps: Peyrepertuse means ‘rocky hill’
‘Pierre Percée’. The path leading to this fortress is narrow and rugged, and ahead looms a curious structure that one hesitates to describe as a castle: it looks more like a kind of natural fortification carved into the rock by the elements. But as you draw nearer, you realise that it is not always easy to distinguish between what is natural and what is not, especially since Peyrepertuse, unlike Quéribus which is very compact, stretches out widely until it merges with the rocky ridges that extend beyond it. It is no longer, in fact, a building with a courtyard, as at Quéribus, and also as at Montségur, but a

a veritable village, “a heavenly Carcassonne”, in the words of Michel Roquebert, who was captivated by the “citadels of Vertige”. The castle itself is merely the heart of a vast complex, perched on an enormous rock that overlooks the entire region.

Peyrepertuse is impressive for its location, which is very different from other castles of this kind. Yet here, history has left hardly any truly visible traces. It is even quite possible that the Cathars never settled there and that the Occitan resistance found no support there. Poorly prepared to withstand the uprising of 1239, Peyrepertuse fell immediately, after a siege of just a few days, to the French advance, when the royal troops, having defeated Trencavel, withdrew to the Corbières. In fact, the only famous figure to have stayed at Peyrepertuse is the renowned Henri de Trastamare, a Spanish noble and pretender to the throne of Castile. He found refuge at Peyrepertuse in 1367, before succeeding in his endeavour and becoming Henri the Magnificent. But the Cathars had long since been forgotten.

Still in the Corbières, the Château d’Aguilar stands above Tuchan, its somewhat romantic ruins. In truth, little remains but the ruins of the great enclosure and the keep, along with a Romanesque chapel. It is quite possible that at the start of the Albigensian Crusade, many Cathars, fleeing the neighbouring towns or having survived the massacres, took refuge for a time in Aguilar Castle. But there are no records to confirm this.

We are more familiar with Termes Castle, also in the Corbières region, but further north-west, near the Razès. Termes was one of the most important castles in the area and gave its name to the region, the Termenès. During the First Crusade, its defenders put up fierce resistance against the royal troops. In 1210, the fortress held out for four months under the incessant bombardment of the catapults. Eventually, Simon de Montfort overcame this desperate resistance and captured the local lord, Raymond

de Termes. Although not a Cathar himself, he had always shown himself to be conciliatory towards the heretics, and, in any case, he could not tolerate the intrusion of northerners into Occitania. Simon de Montfort had him imprisoned in a dungeon in Carcassonne, and it was there that he died. His brother was a Cathar bishop. As for his son, Olivier, he played an active part in the revolt of 1239 before being forced to surrender his fortresses at Aguilar and Termes, make amends, and, as is well known, betray the last defender of Quéribus. Termes remains a name indisputably linked to Catharism. But of the castle, nothing remains but a heap of ruins.

Ruins can also be found in Puilaurens, halfway between Quillan and Saint-Paul de Fenouillet. But here, these are magnificent ruins rising up amidst wooded mountains, in a landscape that is more reminiscent of Montségur than Quéribus. The path leading to the fortress is merely a passage between two hedges of enormous broom bushes before literally plunging into a ravine cut by a series of defensive walls. The entrance gate opens onto a trap: in fact, it is a false entrance, an open-air enclosure where it is impossible to escape the arrows fired from the converging loopholes of the real entrance and the stones hurled from the top of the curtain wall. The courtyard is low: it is a simple enclosure bordered by high walls that rise up like a spur. The parapet walk would almost suffice for defence, so steep and deep is the precipice that opens up immediately beneath the walls. Only two towers provide additional support. The keep dates from the 12th century.

In Puilaurens, everything is small, including the rib-vaulted chamber that occupies the interior of the tower. Yet this smallness, which in no way precludes a sense of reaching towards the sky, lends the whole a strange, almost eerie air. The fact that the surroundings are wooded makes this fortress a sort of haunt for ghosts, or even vampires, as in the Carpathians.

But it was not vampires who frequented Puilaurens. In fact, many Cathars stayed there during the first half of the 13th century. It is true that, to some Catholics in the north, the heretics were regarded as bloodthirsty demons! Unfortunately, there is a lack of documentation regarding this period, and whilst it is certain that Puilaurens was one of the last Cathar strongholds, like Montségur and Quéribus, we know nothing of the events that led to its surrender nor the circumstances in which it took place. As for the Cathars who were there, they too have vanished. They left behind only legends, notably that of the White Lady, in whom some have once again recognised Queen Blanche of Castile. But in 1880, people still believed in this White Lady, as recalled by Louis Fédié, a patient historian of the county of Razès and the diocese of Alet: "The White Lady, that ever-living memory of the Gallo-Celtic era, the personification of the priestesses of the Druidic cult who, two thousand years ago, devoted themselves to the mysteries of their wild rites, is still alive in the region. The White Lady of Puilaurens Castle appears at certain times, during winter nights lit by the crescent moon, and wanders, trailing her ghostly veils behind her, through the imposing ruins of the towers and ramparts of the ancient fortress."

We are here in the Pyrenees, opposite the Corbières. The White Ladies, as is well known, haunt all the valleys of the Pyrenees, right up to the Atlantic side. One was even spotted, one day, in Lourdes, in the Grotto of Massabielle. These White Ladies will not hesitate, moreover, to venture into the Corbières, particularly in the county of Razès, where they are seen on numerous occasions. Admittedly, the image of Chateaubriand's Velléda weighs a little too heavily on people's memories, for historically speaking, there is no evidence that there were ever any druidesses. On the other hand, fairies are of Celtic origin, Gallo-Celtic as Louis Fédié would say. It is true that in 1880, there was not much talk of the Cathars in this region: on the other hand,

we were in the midst of a Celtic craze. Druidic monuments dating back at least two thousand years before the emergence of Druidism were being identified everywhere. It was claimed that the Breton language was the oldest language in the world and that it had been spoken in the Garden of Eden. It was claimed that Jesus was not Jewish, since he was a Galilean, and therefore 'Gaulish'.

These details, which shed light on the prevailing mindset in the region of Puilaurens, Montségur and the county of Razès at the end of the 19th century, are not without significance. They represent a reality that would prove pivotal, in the decades that followed, in the rediscovery of Catharism. Strange traditions concerning Jesus and Mary Magdalene – a White Lady, she too – would resurface in connection with Razès. Curiously, the Cathars would be associated with the Templars, guardians of the Grail, and with the heirs of the ancient Druids, those victims of Roman Catholic repression. And, in the shadows, at the same time, a certain Abbé Boudet, who would become parish priest of Rennes-les-Bains, was preparing a work on the 'true Gallic language', a work as far-fetched as it was fascinating, but which certainly did not come about by chance.

IV

THE UPPER ARIÈGE VALLEY

In our minds, the Cathar country is Occitania. This is not true: Catharism was confined to very specific regions of southern France, and we tend to forget that the heresy also appeared sporadically in the north, particularly in Champagne, not to mention northern Italy, which seems to be the area where it first emerged. It should also be noted that contemporaries did not call the heretics Cathars: that was the name some of them sometimes gave themselves. They were known by the theological term 'dualists' ( ), by the term 'dualists' ( ), by the term 'dualists' ( ) under the common name 'dualists' ( ), and by the colloquial term 'dualists' ( )
'Patarins', a term which clearly derives from a corruption of Cathar, and more generally, particularly from 1209 onwards, under the generic name of Albigensians. Does this mean that the very centre of the heresy was the town of Albi and its immediate surroundings?

Certainly not: there were no more Cathars in Albi than in other towns in the Languedoc. Indeed, it seems that Albi was far less affected by the heresy than other towns, and many of its inhabitants enlisted in the militias that took part in the armed struggle against the heretics. It is possible that the name stems from the memory of a characteristic incident: at the beginning of the 12th century, the Bishop of Albi, Sicard, had attempted to have heretics burned, but the population, respectful of freedom of opinion, had rescued them. It may also be seen as a reminder of the theological debates

that took place in 1176 in Albi itself between the Archbishop of Narbonne and the heretics; these discussions were largely a dialogue of the deaf and ended in failure. In reality, the common people of Occitania tended to refer to the Cathars as ‘good men’, which was a way of acknowledging their moral worth, but which carried no geographical connotation.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact extent of the Cathar presence in medieval Occitania, as it varied greatly, often depending on social or economic conditions, and frequently on the presence of Cathar ‘deacons’ who were more or less effective in their preaching or by their example. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the heresy affected all classes of the population without distinction. Benoit de Termes and Raymond de Mirepoix, for example, were heirs to noble and wealthy families. Esclarmonde de Foix was a viscountess. But alongside them were burghers, rich or poor, peasants, craftsmen, professional soldiers – who abandoned their occupations deemed incompatible with the doctrine of respect for life – vagabonds, renegade clerics of course; in short, a motley and heterogeneous mass. In some villages, everyone was a Cathar. In others, there was not a single one, or very few, sometimes forced to hide. The same was true in towns where orthodox Catholics predominated. But Toulouse, with its university and its concentration of population, was nevertheless a town that was deeply and more or less secretly Cathar. Finally, there were the sympathisers who, without converting, readily accepted the presence of heretics among them, and when necessary helped them as best they could. How many Cathars were thus saved from the dungeons or the pyres of the Inquisition by devout Catholics!

However, the Cathar region can be identified with the area that fell under the influence of the Counts of Toulouse: first and foremost, the County of Toulouse itself, one of the best-organised and most prosperous states of the time.

Before the Crusade of 1209, this county covered some fifteen of our present-day departments, including Haut-Languedoc, Armagnac, Agenais, Quercy, Rouergue, Gévaudan, Comtat Venaissin, Vivarais and Provence, the latter being part of the Holy Roman Empire. To this must be added the domains of the vassals of the Counts of Toulouse, namely those of the Viscounts of 'Carcassonne, Béziers, Albi and Razès' (the Trencavel dynasty), the much smaller domains of the Viscounts of Narbonne, and above all, to the south, the lands of the Count of Foix. The distribution of the heresy across this vast region was obviously very uneven: very weak in Provence and the Vivarais, it reached its highest concentration in the Toulouse region proper, in the Razès and in the County of Foix.

One might ask questions regarding the success of Catharism within the sphere of influence of the Counts of Toulouse: and these questions are linked to the issue of Occitan civilisation.

It is commonly believed that everything associated with Occitan is characterised by its Latin roots and Mediterranean spirit. The County of Toulouse is governed by written law, in contrast to the northern states, which are governed by customary law. The Roman influence seems evident, as in the linguistic sphere: the Occitan language, or rather the various Occitan dialects, are said to be closer to Latin than the dialects of the langue d'oïl. These are nothing but untruths. The Occitan language has evolved in parallel with the langue d'oïl, but what is often overlooked is that this language has undergone less linguistic mixing than the northern languages. It has remained purer; that is to say, generally speaking, it represents the evolution of a Vulgar Latin spoken by populations who originally used the Gallic language, and this continued until a relatively late period. The Celtic influence is significant in the Occitan dialects, *much more so* than in the Oïl dialects. As for the law, whilst it was written and bore clear Roman characteristics, it was balanced by local customs, which were quite different from those of the north, which were strongly influenced by Germanic traditions.

In fact, by the end of the 12th century, the Occitania of the Counts of Toulouse constituted a synthesis harmonious between the

Latin civilisation and Celtic civilisation, a melting pot in which the seeds of another civilisation were taking root – a civilisation that might well have swept across Western Europe had it not been broken, shattered, destroyed, systematically and deliberately, by the Capetian royal power and the lords of the North, with the complicity of the Roman Church, and under the guise of a crusade to defend the true faith.

Occitania is not a monolithic bloc; quite the contrary. The numerous lordships that are more or less vassals of the House of Toulouse are so only in a very flexible sense: vassalage depended on the goodwill of each individual. Even within their own domains, the great feudal lords were in turn held in check by their vassals, most of whom were owners of impregnable fortresses and who acted practically as they pleased. Relations between lords were above all relationships between men, and were not governed by hierarchical rules dictated by an absolute centre, as in the Roman model. On the contrary, Occitan society appears distinctly horizontal in nature, as was the case in **early** Celtic societies. And although urbanisation—a quintessentially Mediterranean phenomenon, not a Celtic one—had reached a very high level, real life bore all the hallmarks of a sort of federation of goodwill in a spirit with democratic tendencies.

The cities of the Midi were, at that time, densely populated and extremely wealthy. Toulouse was the third-largest city in Europe after Venice and Rome. These cities had retained a sense of independence and freedom, and the first 'bastides' began to emerge, administered by the inhabitants themselves, which would contribute to a socio-economic upheaval. Consuls or 'capitouls', elected by the inhabitants, governed them democratically and eventually imposed their will on the lords. And whilst social classes did exist – society was based

[2] I have discussed at length the structures and characteristics of the Celtic-type horizontal society in J. Markale, *King Arthur and Celtic Society*, Paris, Payot, 3rd ed., 1981.

within this social structure – there were no rigid barriers between these groups, since a serf could easily be freed and become a bourgeois, and his son could hope to one day join the knighthood. In this diverse environment, people grew accustomed to mixing and getting to know one another, and showed greater understanding towards those who thought differently. This was certainly not a matter of tolerance, but rather a considerable effort to try to live together.

All these conditions fostered both commercial and cultural exchange. Occitan literature bears witness to this, being the result of a synthesis of different traditions. And it was in Toulouse that, at the time of the revolt by students and professors at the University of Paris in 1229, following a misstep by Blanche of Castile, the brightest intellectuals of the era flocked to the city, drawn by the spirit of freedom that prevailed in university studies. All this could only encourage the development of dualist religion in this region, which had the merit of raising fundamental questions, even if it struggled to resolve them. In any case, this explains the establishment of Catharism.

After 1244, that is to say after the surrender of Montségur, Catharism became even more secretive than it had been before. Admittedly, the Inquisition had dealt a fatal blow to its growth. But religions are tenacious, and they cannot be eradicated once and for all by new laws or by book burnings: a persecuted religion takes refuge in secrecy, perpetuates the memory of its martyrs, maintains its doctrine and sometimes modifies it by adapting it to circumstances that may be new, even if it subsequently disappears for lack of new adherents and proper teaching. This is what happened to Druidism throughout the Late Roman Empire: it died a natural death or was absorbed by the nascent Christian faith. This is what would happen to Catharism. But it would take at least a century to disappear.

We know that the besieged at Montségur managed to get their treasure out, and that on the night before the surrender, four Perfecti escaped, taking ‘secrets’ with them. Elsewhere, at Quéribus as in the other strongholds of the dualists, there were survivors—people whose mission was to save Catharism and keep it alive. They had to be able to rebuild a rudimentary Cathar Church. The question is where these last ‘good men’ took refuge, and how some of them managed to defy the Inquisition and overcome the indifference that was spreading amongst the Occitan population towards them.

Between 1150 and 1240, the final phase of the heresy’s development, the Cathars had been forced to establish a robust, quasi-ecclesiastical organisation. This was hardly in keeping with their traditions or their aims, since Catharism excluded any reference to the priesthood or hierarchy, but in the face of repression, they had been forced to establish a counter-Church. Thus there were dioceses, each headed by a bishop. In truth, these dioceses are merely territories, and the bishop is but one Perfect among others, chosen because he is deemed the most capable of upholding the doctrine and spreading it.

According to all available sources, we may assume the existence of seven Cathar bishoprics in Italy, and seven others in France. There is a vast diocese in northern France, whose seat was probably in Champagne, and the other six are located in Occitania, which demonstrates the limited spread of the heresy. These six dioceses are those of Albi, Toulouse, Carcassonne, Comminges, Razès and Agen: as can be seen, they roughly correspond to the domains of the Count of Toulouse.

But after 1244, it became difficult to maintain this organisation. Everything fell apart during the repression, and Catharism, having gone completely underground, was forced to concentrate in remote areas, such as the upper Ariège valley, around Tarascon. A large number of Perfects and Believers left Occitania, fleeing the Dominican terror, and headed for

Lombardy, where they hoped to blend into the anonymity of its towns and suburbs. Others remained and formed what must be called the last Cathar Church, a sort of diocese of Sabarthès, as this is the name of the region situated around the upper Ariège valley.

Why Sabarthès? Firstly, because it is a little-visited place, sheltered beneath the heights of the Pyrenees—which are not impassable to those who know the secret paths—and also protected by the Tabe massif. Secondly, it is not far from Montségur, and it is likely that the treasure of Montségur, if indeed there was one, was hidden in one of the region's many caves. In any case, it is almost certain that, in the second half of the 13th century, the Sabarthès served as a place of refuge for the last Cathars. And it was there that Bishop Pierre Authier, having returned from Lombardy, carried out, at the end of the century and for some ten years, a true apostolic mission, thwarting all the Inquisitors' traps. The Inquisitors tried by every means to capture him, and they bribed a Believer to hand Pierre Authier over to them. But the traitor was unmasked in time and thrown into a chasm by the other Believers.

Pierre Authier seems to have organised the diocese of Sabarthès in a distinctive manner. His doctrine does not appear to have been entirely the same as that of the early 13th century: it is true that Pierre Authier had been influenced by the Italian Cathars, and that, in any case, dualist thought—which had never been set in stone—had also evolved over the course of some fifty years. It was certainly during this period that the famous practice of *the endura* emerged, which has given rise to countless commentaries and countless legends. It is in fact a sort of mystical suicide consisting of allowing oneself to die of hunger or cold, and on reflection, it is, all things considered, merely a religious form of the secular practice observed among the Eskimos.

But in 1320, Pierre Authier, his parents and his friends were taken prisoner following a skilful round-up. They were

burned at the stake. Thus ended the reign of the last recorded Cathar bishop. However, a few Believers escaped, led by the Perfect Guillaume Belibasta, and fled to northern Spain. But Guillaume Belibasta was hardly worthy of those who were burned at Montségur: he called himself a 'Perfect', he had received the *consolamentum* which, normally, forbade him from having any sexual relations, yet this did not prevent him from neglecting his spirituality for the sake of his concubine and her child. Moreover, Belibasta's venture was short-lived: in 1321, lured into an ambush near Toulouse by agents of the Inquisition, he was captured and consigned to the stake.

In this upper valley of the Ariège, it is the Ussat area that attracts the most attention, because it contains numerous caves in which burial grounds have been discovered, and on whose walls strange engravings or paintings have been found. From there, it was only a short step to claim that these caves of Sabarthès served as hideouts, or even temples, for the last Cathars. And that step was readily taken in the 19th century by certain individuals who had an interest in promoting the region from a tourist perspective. The torch was rekindled in an even more lasting way during the 20th century, notably by Antonin Gadal, a retired schoolteacher, a lover of his native Sabarthès, and—which explains a great deal—chairman of the Ussat-les-Bains tourist office.

Ussat-les-Bains is a small spa town, likely known to the Gauls and Romans, which enjoyed a revival in the 15th century thanks to the healing properties attributed to the hot waters that gush from numerous springs, but which had fallen into disuse by the end of the 19th century. Clearly, this 'spa town' was in need of a new lease of life. So, they 'rediscovered' the Cathars there, and even more remarkably, the Holy Grail itself. Why hold back? They did the same thing to promote Alise-Sainte-Reine (Côte-d'Or) by locating Vercingetorix's Alesia there, *in defiance of all Latin and Greek texts*, even though this Alesia did not

can only be found in the Jura. But in Alise-Sainte-Reine, this is official history, Vercingétorix being the ancestor of all French people, as everyone knows, and this certainty is backed by an imperial decree of Napoleon III, supported by the Republic's official archaeologists, and endorsed by tourist information offices as well as trade associations. It is therefore deeply ingrained. But in the Sabarthès, Cathar memories do not stand up to official archaeology, and are no longer even taken seriously. This does not mean that one cannot discover traces of the 'good men' there. One must keep things in perspective and avoid falling into the trap of over-interpretation.

The Ussat area is dotted with caves and springs. Underground volcanic activity is evident here, which must have held both secular and religious appeal for prehistoric peoples: the hot waters gushing from the earth's depths must surely be of divine origin; it is likely that the region was once a vast sanctuary dedicated to a nurturing and protective earth deity. In the vertical cliff face where the Ramploque cave opens, steam escapes from time to time, revealing an inner life. This 'smoking hole' communicates via a chasm with the underground hot-water lake, which is the overflow from the thermal spring. Fifteen or twenty thousand years ago, the water must have seeped into the meadows that now border the Ariège, forming streams, pools and warm mudpools. This hot water must have attracted tribes of hunters, and later settled herders, to the area around Niaux. Moreover, one could travel from Niaux to Ussat via the famous Lombrives Cave, one of the largest in all of Europe. And the hot mud healed wounds and alleviated certain ailments. Now, we know full well that river sources and healing waters have always been the subject of worship in ancient times, as medicine and religion were closely intertwined. Do people not still go to Lourdes today more for medical reasons than for free religious events?

Admittedly, the Lombrives Cave arouses curiosity and admiration. It is immense. The succession of rocky chambers reveals a rare profusion of limestone formations, stalactites and stalagmites. Moreover, one discovers a wealth of enigmatic drawings, enough to set even the most rationalist's imagination alight from visitors, and an significant harvest of archaeological 'material'. Throughout the 19th century, researchers, volunteers and other interested parties made extensive use of it.

In 1877, the archaeologist Gustave Marty described his exploration of the Lombrives cave as follows: 'When the steps were built at the far end of the "Grande Salle", pieces – sort of large slabs – were removed from the stalagmite floor to form the steps; a large quantity of human bones was then discovered. I obtained some… The cemetery is at the far end of the passage. One enters into this gloomy chamber where more than 500 people were buried, but who have been covered by stalagmitic layers. This chamber is 82 metres long; its average width is 18 metres, including the large depression on the right; its height varies from 8 to 15 metres; this chamber is fully illuminated. A large quantity of human bones was discovered here, hence the name given to it by the guides… A large number of remarkable artefacts from the Bronze Age have been recovered from here, including polished stone axes, bronze fishhooks, and pierced wolf, dog and fox teeth; some of these artefacts are housed in the natural history museums of Toulouse and Bordeaux.

'At the far end of the cemetery lies the passage known as the Sahara Desert, so named by the guides… A little further on, the passage curves ever so slightly; in the centre of this curve there is a depression which is also filled with sand; upon stirring it, I found human bones and pierced wolf and fox teeth. In this chamber, I found human bones, hearths containing charcoal, four schist stone moulds—one for hairpins

, another for laces, the third forming a sort of large pin or case, and the fourth for casting the arrowhead of a spear—a fine piece of work and perfectly well preserved. The interior of this two-part mould contained the bronze core intended to form the shaft socket; I also found some **pottery** shards there3."

It seems to be accepted that the burial sites and workshops discovered in the Lombrives cave undoubtedly date from Protohistory, if not Prehistory. The journalist Jules Metman, who never claimed to be an archaeologist and who never concerned himself with scientific history, merely claimed to conjure up, from natural settings, beautiful stories to bring a tear to the eye. He wrote the following in 1892 in the newspaper *La Mosaïque du Midi*:

'The Lombrives Cave opens out in the mountainside, almost directly opposite the spa; I visited it last year with great pleasure; I have never seen a cathedral with more daring vaults or more spacious naves; I know of no palace whose galleries are more vast, more resonant, or more evenly proportioned. I still recall with emotion the moment when, having all four reached the largest chamber of this marvellous cave, each holding a faint light, whose pale reflections half-illuminated the white stalactites hanging from the vault or casting their fantastical shapes upon the floor, we intoned, in hollow, mournful voices, the opening verses of *the Dies irae*, then sang at the top of our voices the marvellous chorus from the third act of *Robert le* **Diable4**."

The tone is set. And Jules Metman takes this opportunity to recount an event said to have taken place in 1802 in the Ussat region and in the Lombrives cave. Smugglers who had become seasoned bandits are said to have used this cave as a hideout, and for their acts of violence, having become

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[3] Gustave Marty, *The Caves of the Ariège and in particular that of Lombrives*, Toulouse, 1877.

[4] Quoted by Christian Bernadac, *Le mystère Otto Rahn*, Paris, France-Empire, 1978.

The situation became unbearable, and the troops had to be called in. The soldiers then engaged in a fierce battle with the bandits, which led to a horrific massacre of both bandits and soldiers inside the cave itself. And Jules Metman, after his account told at a rapid pace—it must be said—with a distinct sense of the epic and genuine literary talent, concludes as follows: 'The cave still bears, in many places, the traces of the scenes of carnage we have just recounted, and the quantity of skulls and human bones, with which the ground, in certain places, is as if kneaded, proves that, despite the care taken to gather up and carry out the remains of the victims of this bloody expedition, their number was so great that many escaped all searches and retain as their tomb the very place where they lost their lives."

It is quite possible that bandits used the caves of Ussat as hideouts or storage places, particularly at a time when popular belief held that the bowels of the earth harboured intermediate, even sinister, worlds frequented only by diabolical beings. Inhabited during the great ice ages of prehistory because they offered the only possible refuge, caves—especially those that are deep and dark—gave rise to the worst terrors and the most varied fantasies during periods when life on the earth's surface was pleasant. One would only venture into these devil's caverns in cases of absolute necessity, save for a few daring souls who claim to discover there the treasures of the other world, or to indulge in unspeakable rituals. Folklore from all countries, and particularly that of the Pyrenees, is full of accounts of strange apparitions near caves of this kind: the famous White Lady, of course, dwells there, and it is there that she takes the children she steals from the villages; there are also ogres who gather there, feasting merrily on human flesh; there are devils who hold their sabbath there in the company of witches, the

only those who are not afraid to venture inside. Caves are a forbidden world.

But, consequently, an alluring world.

At the very end of the 19th century, whilst the 'scholars of the county town', as they are so charmingly called, were gathering all they could discover of oral folk traditions to fill the journals of learned societies, an Occitan writer, Napoléon Peyrat, deeply devoted to his homeland, published a three-volume *History of the Albigensians*. In the third volume, we find these lines concerning the Lombrives cave:

"How can we bring to light this obscure tragedy, lost for over five hundred years, 2,000 metres deep within the earth, of which no evidence remains save a silent heap of half-petrified bones?" And we are suddenly plunged into the Cathar world of 1244: "Ever since the day the pious Loup de Foix came to pray in the cave of Ornolac, five or six hundred mountain dwellers—men, women and children—who had fled their hamlets, had settled in this darkness and formed, around the Cathar pastor, a mixture of mystical colony and wild camp. A new Montségur had taken shape, no longer chivalrous like the other, perched in the clouds, but rustic instead, and lost in a mountain cave, a chasm pierced by a torrential stream."

It feels as though you're really there. But that's not all: having been discovered by the Inquisition, the Lombrives cave is about to be raided by royal troops, with the blessing of the Lord of Castelverdun, owner of the Ornolac estate on which the cave is situated—a lord who has recently converted to true Catholicism. 'The seneschal steps beneath the vast porch, forces his way through the narrow passage inside, and believes he is sweeping them all up in a single net, like a nest of wild beasts, deep within a lair, beneath the dead-end rotunda of Loup de Foix. But the cave is double, or rather the eastern passage he had just traversed is of an extending of a quarter of a league, is nothing more than the

vestibule of an upper gallery three times as deep, which forms the main cavern.

'One ascends this via a cliff face eighty feet high, vertical but divided by five or six ledges, whose cornices support the wooden ladders leaning against the rock. The Cathars, pulling the ladders up behind them, were instantly impregnable in the darkness of their subterranean lair. The Catholic host, believing it had cornered them in the rotunda's dead end, was itself pierced, crushed, and struck down by a storm of whistling arrows, leaping rocks, and savage howls, rolling from that dark maw which, according to geologists, spews forth the oceanic torrent."

The epic style of this description is undeniable. Unfortunately, Napoleon Peyrat does not claim to be a writer, but a historian. He continues: 'The seneschal retreated, gathered up his dead, walled up the narrow eastern entrance and sealed the victorious Cathars inside their fortress, which had become their tomb. He camped for a few more days at the mouth of the cave, above the Ariège, then, when he heard no more movement in the bowels of the rock, thinking that all was over, he descended calmly and returned to Toulouse."

All this seems to follow an implacable logic. It is, in any case, an event that is in keeping with the relentless struggles of the era. The problem is that Napoléon Peyrat is the only one to recount this story and that he cites no sources for it. He even indulges in a description of the agony of the walled-in Cathars:

'They quietly resigned themselves to their fate and smiled sadly at their graves. As fruit-eaters and long-term fasters, willingly imposing upon themselves *the hardship* they had reserved for their final sufferings, they calmly accepted this torment of hunger, their customary and religious form of suicide… They lived on for a while longer: they had clay pots, heaps of vegetables in the rock hollows, and, not far away, a small lake of pure water. But one day they ran out of everything… So they gathered together in their families… For a few moments,

above the pious murmur of prayers, the voice of the Cathar minister could still be heard, professing the Word that was in God and that was God. The faithful deacon gave the dying the kiss of peace and fell asleep in turn. All rested in sleep, and the drops of water falling slowly from the vaults were the only thing to disturb the sepulchral silence for centuries. ”

This certainly makes for an excellent account. But Napoleon Peyrat no doubt fears that his story will not be taken at face value. And since he cites no contemporary documents to back up his claims, he moves straight on to the era of the Huguenots: ‘Jacques de Castelverdun was lord of Ornolac and of its sinister cave, sealed for two and a half centuries. Time, in those days, reopened this great Albigensian ossuary. The Protestants, who were perhaps seeking their ancestors in the mountain caverns, driven by vague and tragic memories, entered these burial crypts. They entered, reached the oratory of Loup de Foix, *climbed the ladders still standing* to the upper cave, and discovered, oh terrifying wonder! a whole people asleep and lying down, almost petrified themselves as if in stone coffins. ’ It should be noted that Napoléon Peyrat no longer remembered the details he had previously described so well: the ladders that the Cathars had removed before being walled up in their cave are now *still in place*, which is surprising to say the least. That said, it is entirely possible that Protestants entered the Lombrives cave during the Wars of Religion, not to seek out hypothetical ancestors, but simply to hide there. And if they had forced their way into the central cavern, they would inevitably have discovered bones, since there had been some there since prehistoric times. However, there are no records of such a discovery in the 16th century, and Napoleon Peyrat, of course, does not cite his sources.

There is more. This account of the Protestants’ discovery of the skeletons of the Cathar martyrs ends with a fantastical vision: ‘The mountain, which had been weeping for its children

for three centuries, had built them, from its frozen tears, tombs of stalagmites. Moreover, it had raised them up as a triumphal monument and transformed the hideous cavern into a basilica marvellously decorated with mouldings and symbolic sculptures. One could see a pulpit, candelabra, and urns; then priestly vestments, a pallium, and tiaras; then, scattered around these dead, fruits—melons and mushrooms, emblems of life; and finally a bronze bell, whose enormous clapper, as if fallen from its vault, lay on the ground, a symbol of eternal silence and at the same time a sign of the victory won by these martyrs over the Prince of the Air, whose silent bugle adorned their sepulchral vault."

Although it is not entirely clear what tiaras and lavish priestly regalia – even if they are merely an optical illusion – are doing amongst the Perfect Ones, who have renounced the world and Satan's vain riches, there is something moving about this fanciful depiction. And it may well remain symbolic. The author's mistake is to have passed this off as history.

However, in an anonymous pamphlet, published in 1963 in Ussat-les-Bains, but drawing on fragmentary texts by Antonin Gadal, who was president of the Ussat tourist office, we read the following: 'After the year 1000, the Cathars lived in caves, vast, safe and pleasant dwellings; they fortified some of them to turn them into veritable castles. These were called *spoulgas* or fortified caves. And so it was that the *spoulga* of Bouan, the residence of a bishop, became the church of Bouan. " And elsewhere, regarding the chambers of the Lombrives cave: "Mysterious symbols and inscriptions from every century cover their walls. On y trouve, cœur grandiose de la caverne, la 'Cathedral of the Cathars' (in 1244, following the fall of Montségur, the cave became the seat of the Cathar bishop Amiel Aicard). For a long time, the Ariège and Sos valleys had been connected between they to by through the caves of

Lombrives and Niaux. “Thus, in complete safety and secrecy, the members of the Temple of the Spirit had a means of communication amongst themselves.” And in another short work, also published in Ussat-les-Bains, but this time under the name of Antonin Gadal, one can read an abridged version of the account of the walling-in of the Cathars, clearly distinct from that of Napoléon Peyrat. It also contains all the desired information concerning the ‘troglodyte republic of Sabarthès’, accompanied by a glowing tribute to Napoléon Peyrat, described as the ‘trumpet of Aquitaine’, and to a certain Abbé Vidal who is said to have examined a document of ‘the utmost importance’ in the Vatican library, but which only
‘a few, as yet inexperienced, hands’ have been able to leaf through. We are still awaiting the publication of this document.

Furthermore, Antonin Gadal, chairman of the Ussat tourist office, was the friend, mentor and mentor of the enigmatic Otto Rahn. He introduced Rahn not only to the hideouts and cathedrals of the Cathars of Sabartès, but also to the symbolic signs found in the caves, particularly at Lombrives. This has given us this magnificent passage by Otto Rahn in **The Court of Lucifer**: ‘It was, of course, the testimonies from the Albigensian era that moved me the most. There are many of them, but they are very difficult to uncover. For a whole year, without seeing it, I passed by the image that a Cathar hand traced in charcoal on the marble wall seven centuries ago in the eternal night of the cave: it depicts a ship of the dead whose sail is the sun, the sun that bestows life and is reborn every winter!… I also saw a tree – the tree of life – also drawn in charcoal; and finally, in a most mysterious crevice, the outline, carved into the stone, of a dove which is said to have been the symbol of the Spirit of God and to have appeared on the coat of arms of the Knights of the Grail.”

So here we are: the Grail is in the Sabarthès, although others claim it is to be found in Montségur. This is all the more irritating given that, in the valley running parallel to Vicdessos, the

the castle of Montréal-sur-Sos contains an enigmatic drawing in which even scientists have believed they discerned a representation of the Grail. But the drawing dates from the late Middle Ages, or perhaps even the 17th or 18th century, and has nothing to do with the Cathars. As for the dove, the tree of life and the boat of the dead, Antonin Gadal and Otto Rahn are probably the only ones – apart from those who take their word for it – to have seen them. But in this way, Gadal – for he was *the one who invented it* – linked the Cathars to the sun cult and to the legend of the Grail in its German version.

There is, of course, a great deal of rock art in the caves of the Sabarthès region, dating from all periods. There are even countless drawings and engravings dating back to the Upper Palaeolithic period, all of which are perfectly authentic: the Niaux Cave is particularly rich and interesting in this respect. But what does this have to do with the Cathars? Antonin Gadal's fanciful claims gave rise to veritable novels: the caves of Ussat became initiation sanctuaries for the Cathars – and also for the Knights of the Grail. And since the graffiti were not formal enough, people took it upon themselves to create more or to tamper with the records **made** of them. Christian Bernadac, a native of Ussat who knew Antonin Gadal well, debunks all these allegations in the thorough investigation he undertook into **The Otto Rahn Mystery**. He points out that prehistorians who have studied the cave paintings in the Sabarthès caves have long since shed light on the various origins of these paintings: none of them date from the Cathar period.

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[5] I have personally witnessed this sort of wear and tear on the dolmens in Morbihan, which feature engraved surfaces. As the engravings are difficult to photograph due to the ravages of time and the weather, one can accentuate the lines by tracing over them with chalk. However, in doing so, it is very easy to add to or 'arrange' a depiction to suit whatever meaning one wishes to ascribe to it. In the resulting photograph, the tampering is undetectable, which allows certain 'inspired' individuals to make comments that defy not only common sense but the most basic honesty. Christian Bernadac has witnessed similar practices in the caves of Ussat.

It is clear that these Cathars lived in the Sabarthès region. For a time, the upper Ariège valley offered them a fairly safe haven from the Inquisitors. But we have no proof of this, and in any case no evidence that they settled in those famous caves said to be places of initiation or secret sanctuaries. Christian Bernadac is categorical on this point:
"The Cathars," he said, "never lived in caves. The Cathars were never initiated in caves. The Cathars never carved a single mark on the walls of Lombrives, Bethlehem or l'Ermite (two other caves in Ussat). The Cathars never fortified a single cave entrance. The Cathars were never pursued through 'dark corridors'. The Cathars never held a single service in the stone cathedrals deep within Lombrives… On a single occasion, in the records of the Inquisition, an accused man confessed that he had hidden in the entrance to the Bédeilhac cave for a few hours to escape his pursuers. Today we know exactly where the "safe houses", "seminaries", "huts" and "clearing" in the forest were located, which sheltered those being pursued. Every testimony before the Inquisition mentions the routes and the safe houses in precise detail."

In short, provided one is willing to remain objective, it is impossible to regard the caves of the upper Ariège valley as having served as refuges or sanctuaries for the Cathars. This may be a pity for those who love mystery or the esoteric and picturesque, but that is the way it is. In any case, there is no need to regret this fact: the mystery lies elsewhere.

V

THE COUNTY OF RAZÈS

Razès is certainly one of the strangest regions imaginable, both for the beauty of its rocky landscapes—which once again evoke the Gaste Terre surrounding the Castle of the Grail—and for its vast horizons opening out towards the sea, the Pyrenean peaks and the undulating expanses of the Massif Central. When you find yourself in the region, you feel as though you are somewhere else, a little like on the moors surrounding the Forest of Brocéliande in Brittany. This is, moreover, not the only subtle link that unites Razès with Armorican Brittany.

Firstly, there is the name 'Razès' itself, a term derived from the evolution of the ancient *name 'Rhedae'*, attested in numerous ancient documents. As the Visigothic settlement was very significant in the region, it has been assumed that the name is Germanic. It is said that the Visigoths founded the fortress of Rennes-le-Château, at the heart of the *Rhedesium* or Pagus *Reddensis*. It is from this latter name that the current names of Rennes-le-Château and Rennes-les-Bains derive. It is worth noting that this is exactly the same name as that of the Breton capital, which, having been originally called *Condate* (confluence), took the name of the Gallic people who inhabited it, the *Rhedones*. The root of *Rhedae* and *Rhedones* is strictly identical, but it has nothing to do with the Visigoths: it is mentioned by Caesar (*Rhedis equitibus comprehensis*, VI, 30) and by other Latin authors in connection with very fast war chariots. The original etymological meaning

seems to mean ‘to run fast’, and we find it in the names of the Rhine and the Rhône, which are rivers that ‘flow fast’, as well as in the modern Breton verb *redek* (to run). There can be no doubt about this, despite the wild interpretations of some who see in it ‘Red, god of thunder and storms, whose temples were underground’, probably because they recognise *the* English word ‘red’ in it. What business would the English language have in this region? But the height of absurdity is reached by certain individuals who claim to be writers and, above all, ‘insiders ’ (to what?), whose works are widely distributed by local tourist offices, and who, weaving into their ramblings a hodgepodge of languages as disparate as they are surprising, trace the name of Razès back to an ‘Aer-Red, the running serpent or the mystical Wouivre’. Admittedly, the etymology is Celtic, as is the legend of the Wouivre – who would become Melusine in Poitou – and *‘aer’* does indeed mean ‘serpent’, but in modern Breton. What business does the Breton language, modern at that, have in the Razès? One might object that the links between the Razès and Armorica are well established. Yes, but with this one caveat: the people of the Rhedones never spoke Breton; their language was Gaulish, a language lost because the druids forbade the use of writing, and whose essential vocabulary linguists such as Georges Dottin, between the two world wars, struggled greatly to reconstruct. It is also said that a village in Razès is called ‘La Serpent’. But what does that prove? There are vipers in Razès, as elsewhere, and in the past the term was feminine: why must we absolutely see in it the remembered image of an ancient serpentine deity? Moreover, it seems very difficult to incorporate *‘aer’* into *‘Rhedae*’. This sort of fanciful interpretation, whilst claiming to offer solutions to the problems at hand, merely deepens the darkness. And it does nothing to eliminate the problems. On the contrary, it raises even more of them. For there are no legends, no relentless pursuit of

far-fetched interpretations, devoid of any deeper reality lying beneath. It is this reality that we must seek out.

One thing is certain about the Razès: the people who gave their name to the region were a Gallic tribe, the *Rhedones*, whom we find in Armorica, in the Vilaine basin. It may seem curious, at first glance, that the same people should have settled in two places so far apart. But this is by no means an exception, and migration has always been a part of history. As for the Gauls, we find the Atrebates in Arras – where they left their name – and in Britain; the Boii in Bohemia (where their name is recognisable) and in La Teste-de-Buch, near Arcachon, where they also left their name; the Bituriges *Vivisci* in Vevey, on the shores of Lake Geneva, to which they gave their name; and in the Médoc; the Osismes in northern Finistère and in Exmes (Orne), which bears their name. As for the Gabales, settled in the Cévennes, they founded a settlement at Gavaudun (*Gabaloduno*), in Lot-et-Garonne, right in the heart of the territory occupied by the Nitiobroges, on the border with that of the Petrocores (Périgueux). The process is well known. All the Gauls came from the Harz. In the second Iron Age, during the so-called La Tène period, around 400 BC, they all crossed the Rhine. Among them were the Rhedones, who split into two groups: one went west, to Armorica, the other south, to the Corbières. Unless we should instead consider a later migration, in 56 BC, from the Vilaine basin, following the defeat of the Armoricaine confederation by Caesar—a confederation led by the Veneti of Vannes and in which the Rhedones participated. They would then have settled in the most deprived regions of a vast territory occupied by the Volques Tectosages, in a country that was already under strong Roman influence.

Moreover, the place-names of the Razès region are heavily influenced by Celtic elements, particularly in the vicinity of Rennes-le-Château. On can y be seen the word *bec*, that is to say
'point', in Saint-Julia de Bec and La Coume de Bec. The word

'coume' is Gallic, meaning 'hollow' (the valley), and is found in the As of Hadras. The Bézu is or the 'birch', or 'tomb', and is found almost everywhere. The name Alet appears to be the same as the former name of Saint-Servan (Ille-et-Vilaine), in the land of the Rhedones of Armorica – as if by chance. Artigues derives from the root *arto-*, meaning 'bear'. The name of the Pic de Chalabre comes from the root *calo*, meaning 'hard'. The Verdouble torrent derives from the ancient *Vernodubrum*, meaning 'stream of the alders'. Cassaignes is derived from the Gaulish word *cassano*, 'oak'. Belvianes and Belesta, like other compounds of 'Bel' most likely derives from the name of the Gallic sun god Belenos, 'the Shining One', rather than from the adjective denoting beauty, although the Old French 'bel', which has nothing to do with the Latin *'bellum'*, does stem from the same root denoting luminous beauty. Indeed, regarding solar deities, we find the epithet of the Gallic Apollo, Grannus, in the village of Granès: but the Gallic Apollo (who is the Irish Diancecht) is far more a healing god than a solar god. As for Limoux, the most famous town in the Razès region thanks to its renowned 'blanquette' and its carnival, its name—which is the same as Limours in the Île-de-France region—is derived from the Gallic name for the elm tree, a name also found in Lake Geneva and in Limoges, the town of the Lemovices. One could cite many more examples: they would demonstrate a strong Celtic presence in this region, whose southern character is nevertheless beyond doubt, at least on the surface.

It is therefore not without reason that Father Henri Boudet, who served as parish priest of Rennes-les-Bains around 1900, wrote and published a book in 1886 entitled **The True Celtic Language and the Cromlech of Rennes-les-Bains**. This worthy clergyman, who led a wise and secluded life, claimed to have rediscovered this lost Gallic language through the stones of his region. To do so, he boldly drew upon numerous languages, and in particular la langue anglaise, on se demande encore

why, and the endorsement of authors who, like Chateaubriand, knew absolutely nothing about linguistics.

Thus Abbé Boudet interprets the name Rennes, and that of Rhedae, in a rather original way: the people of the Rhedones, those of Armorica and those of the Corbières, would have been the

'tribe of the learned stones – *read* (*red*) learned – *hone*, carved stone. Study and science were indispensable to understanding the purpose of erecting the megaliths, and only they possessed the knowledge and meaning of this, having learnt it from the very mouths of the Druids." This acknowledges that the Druids possessed great knowledge, a fact confirmed by all authors of Greek and Latin antiquity. But the trouble is that the megalithic monuments belong to a civilisation entirely different from that of the Celts and were built at least two thousand years before the arrival of the Druids. This is rather unfortunate for Abbé Boudet's thesis. And one wonders why this explanation is couched in such broken English. It is likely that the author was in desperate need of *scholarly* references to justify his argument. But as misfortune never comes alone, one might note that there is not even a cromlech, nor has there ever been one, in the vicinity of Rennes-les-Bains.

Never mind: Father Boudet is not short of arguments. 'One might wonder why the name Rennes is applied to our spa; the reason becomes clear when one examines this strange region closely: indeed, its rock-capped mountains form a vast cromlech with a circumference of sixteen or eighteen kilometres. ' It was simple; one only had to think of it. On that account, there is no doubt that, *on closer inspection*, one might discover an even more impressive cromlech in the Chaîne des Puys in Auvergne, probably in honour of the god Lug-Mercury: I would urge a researcher as gifted as Abbé Boudet – one of his many followers, for there are many! – to examine the situation *closely*. But this obsession with engraved stone concerning a people who never used

The description is rather surprising. *Seen up close*, 'a cluster of large rocks known as Cugulhou' lends itself to an interesting interpretation: 'This mass is not entirely natural; the work of the Celts (*sic*) is clearly evident in the eight or ten large, round stones that have been transported and placed on top of the megalith. ' After all, the word 'megalith' means 'large stone' and can apply to a mountain, but one must, in passing, admire the observer's lack of precision, who no longer even knows whether there are eight or ten large round stones on a site that is one of the cornerstones of his system.
'Fortunately, the very name *Cugulhou* sheds light on this matter. These rocks are genuine menhirs (let's leave that aside…), but they are ugly and do not have the usual shape of other standing stones: *to cock*, to raise, to set upright – *ugly* (*eugly*), ugly, misshapen, unsightly – *to hew* (*hiou*), to carve. " This is a rather acrobatic etymology, and of course entirely English, with this added bonus: a pun that the worthy clergyman surely neither intended nor understood, as *'to cock'* is, in colloquial English, the equivalent of the no less colloquial French 'bander'.

From a linguistic or toponymic perspective, as well as from a historical one, Abbé Boudet's work is not even a joke: it is an implausible web of untruths, near-absurdities, nonsense and naivety that nothing can justify, even if one is inclined towards the utmost indulgence. It is , moreover this that understood certain
'hermetists' or journalists drawn to the mysteries of Rennes-le-Château and the surrounding area: thoroughly perplexed by a text they had once praised to the skies, they eventually came to see it as a brilliant and subtle cryptogram. Consequently, Abbé Boudet becomes a precursor to Jacques Lacan and his book a coded map to find the 'treasure' hidden in the Razès – why not the Cathars' treasure? We wish the enthusiasts every pleasure. And there are plenty of them, it seems.

One is nevertheless compelled to ask a question, an essential one: given *that* Abbé Boudet's work constitutes such an enormity, *are we sure he didn't do it on purpose*? One

is well aware that the great classical texts of the Middle Ages, particularly those by Chrétien de Troyes and those concerning the Quest for the Holy Grail, are riddled with pitfalls, inconsistencies, paradoxes, dead ends, false accounts and blatant exaggerations – and this is entirely by the authors' own design. These texts are indeed coded, and it takes patience to untangle the web they form *together*. However, it would appear that Abbé Boudet's book is of the same nature and forms part of a whole. It should therefore not be examined in terms of linguistics, history or even wordplay, or even puns, but as part of a whole.

For although the Razès constitutes a distinct entity, a specific region, it cannot be separated from the rest, that is to say, from the Cathar domain, of which, together with the Sabarthès and the Montségur region, it is the undisputed centre. Looking for the Celtic elements of Razès is all well and good, but these are a sort of mirror through which other images come to interfere. When one insists on considering only the tip of the iceberg, one risks sinking by colliding with the submerged part, which is far more substantial. Yet Razès has a history.

This history begins early. Excavations undertaken in 1930 beneath the promontory of Rennes-le-Château uncovered Solutrean burials, dating from the Upper Palaeolithic, around 30,000 years ago. Human occupation continued uninterrupted, leaving a few remains from the Magdalenian period at the end of the Palaeolithic, and, from the 4th millennium BCE onwards, the Razès landscape was dotted with megalithic monuments, of which a few examples remain, including the Peyrolles menhir, known as *Peiro Dreito*, the 'standing stone'.

Then came the Iron Age and the Celtic occupation by the Volques Tectosages and the Rhedones. The cult of water, attested at Rennes-les-Bains and Alet, suggests that the Razès region, being fairly isolated and dotted with forests, must have contained numerous places of worship, the famous *nemetons*, sanctuaries or

clearing dedicated to guardian or healing deities such as Grannus.

In 121 BC, the Romans occupied what would become *Gallia Togata* or 'Narbonnaise'. Traces of the Romans are still visible at Alet and Rennes-les-Bains, where they utilised the springs and developed them as they did almost everywhere in Gaul. Remains of a Roman road from Alet to Rennes-les-Bains have also been found, a section of a major route that was intended to link Carcassonne to the Catalan coast via what is now known as the Col de Saint-Louis. However, there is no trace of Roman occupation at Rennes-le-Château, which is perfectly explained by the Roman habit of settling in valleys to better monitor and maintain the communication routes, a vital system for an administration responsible for a vast and scattered territory.

It was under Visigothic rule that the Razès region came to play a particularly significant role. There was an important fortress in the region, known as Rhedae, which people still insist, without evidence, was located at Rennes-le-Château. And in 507, following the Battle of Vouillé, won by Clovis and the Franks who advanced as far as the Pyrenees, the stronghold of Rhedae appears to have remained in the hands of the Visigoths. It would also appear that, around this time, the region saw an influx of Jewish settlers, likely due to Jews from the Diaspora fleeing regions threatened by war or seeking to escape potential persecution.

At the time the Carolingians came to power, the county of Rhedae was undoubtedly the place of exile for the Merovingian prince Sigisbert IV (676–758), likely the son of Dagobert II, who was murdered on the orders of Pepin of Heristal. It is believed that the descendants of Sigisbert IV had to hide in the mountains of Razès to escape the threats of the Carolingians, before emigrating to Armoricaine Brittany, a region that was never subjugated by the Carolingians, and where they are thought to have settled. In the 13th- , by for example, lists among their

possible descendants include Hugues de Lusignan, Count of La Marche, and Alix, titular Duchess of Brittany.

This is the most disputed period in the history of the Razès, but also the one richest in events of all kinds. Charlemagne took a keen interest in the region, and to keep abreast of what was happening there, he sent the Bishop of Orléans, a certain Theodulf. The latter composed a poem about his journey, mentioning Rhedae not far from Carcassonne. This is undoubtedly the first official mention of the name. And the text suggests that, at that time, Rhedae was as important as Carcassonne. Southern tradition describes the town of Rhedae as having 30,000 inhabitants and seven butcher's stalls, plus a monastery of monks equipped with defences. All this seems rather dubious. Of course, the southern tradition exaggerates, but the importance of Rhedae is confirmed by later documents. Yet it is impossible that such a settlement could have occupied the site of Rennes-le-Château at that time, which is far too small and far too narrow on its promontory to have been a major town. And nothing in the substructures of Rennes-le-Château can confirm this identification. At most, Rennes-le-Château was an observation post housing a small garrison, and it is more than likely that the original Rhedae was situated at Limoux.

Be that as it may, Charlemagne took an interest in the region. To defend this Septimania, which was constantly exposed to Saracen raids, he appointed a man named Guilhem de Gellone to be in charge of this March. After accomplishing a great many feats, Guilhem went on to spend the rest of his life in the monastery of Saint-Guilhem-du-Désert, which he had founded. Guilhem de Gellone was undoubtedly a Merovingian, a descendant of Sigisbert IV. Moreover, he is enshrined in legend: he indeed became Guillaume d'Orange, the hero of the Chansons de Geste in the cycle known as Garin de Montglane, a valiant slayer of Saracens and protector of Louis the Pious.

In 813, the Count of Rhedae, Béra IV, founded Alet Abbey, at least according to a deed of donation which appears to be a forgery. All that is certain is that by the end of the 10th century, the well-established Abbey of Alet was part of a sort of congregation led by the abbot of Saint-Michel de Cuxa. And, a century later, in 1096, Pope Urban II stayed at Alet, which testifies to the importance the abbey had acquired. A period of decline began for Alet at the end of the 12th century, at a time when the Cathars were becoming increasingly numerous in the Razès. In 1317, Pope John XXII established the diocese of Limoux, but following disputes over revenues in Limoux—revenues held by nuns—the bishopric was transferred to Alet in 1318: the abbey church then became a cathedral.

But by 870, the county of Razès had passed to the House of Carcassonne. The town of Rhedae—whichever it was, Limoux or Rennes-le-Château—was the subject of feudal disputes between the Counts of Carcassonne and the Counts of Barcelona, and it was attached now to one, now to the other, until Countess Ermengarde, in 1067, sold her sovereignty over Carcassonne and Razès to her relative Raymond-Béranger, Count of Barcelona, for a sum of one thousand one hundred ounces of gold.

This was the era of the Cathars. The Razès region was under the command of Raymond-Roger Trencavel, Viscount of Carcassonne and Béziers, a renowned protector of heretics and champion of Occitan independence. During the Crusade of 1209, Raymond-Roger was taken prisoner by Simon de Montfort and died in the dungeons of Carcassonne. His son had been entrusted to the Count of Foix and raised at his court, where – as was no secret to anyone – heretics of all stripes thronged, yet they had one thing in common: a hatred of the French. And the young Trencavel declared loud and clear that his life's goal was to reclaim the inheritance he had been denied, namely the counties of Carcassonne, Albi and Razès.

Trencavel is a curious character. He is the driving force behind the revolt of the 'faidits' (the dispossessed lords) in 1239

and 1240, accompanied by Olivier de Termes, one of his vassals who still held the Corbières, the Termenès and the fortresses of Quéribus and Peyrepertuse. Trencavel achieved stunning successes which he failed to capitalise on, and it seems that at that time, Raymond VII of Toulouse did not assist him due to excessive hesitation. Olivier de Termes submitted to the king following a vigorous French counter-offensive and, no doubt bribed by the Capetians, betrayed Trencavel's cause. The revolt ended in failure, and the Razès was occupied by royal troops hunting down the heretics. These heretics, who were very numerous—as evidenced by the creation in 1225 of a Cathar diocese in the county—were forced to take refuge in inaccessible places. And the Razès had no shortage of such places. Trencavel officially submitted to the king, but he did not regain his estates, and he resolved to remain in Aragon.

One thing is certain: Trencavel tried desperately to recapture the Razès, which seems to have held exceptional importance for him. Similarly, Louis IX and Blanche of Castile did everything in their power to maintain their control over the Razès and eliminate Trencavel. It is this dual determination that has drawn the attention of historians and commentators alike to the figure of Trencavel: did he know some secret connected with Razès, or was he aware of the presence of a vast treasure in that region? This has given rise to a multitude of interpretations as diverse as they are surprising. It has even been claimed that Trencavel was the model for Perceval-Parzival (Antonin Gadal, yet again!…), with the addition of an onomastic argument: Trencavel means
'Tranche bien' and Perceval 'Perce bien'. There is, however, no connection between the two names, and Perceval could just as easily mean 'Perce-Val' as 'Perd-ce-Val', the latter hypothesis appearing, moreover, to be the more plausible in this context. As for this identification, prompted largely by the life of Trencavel, it is blatantly absurd: the young Trencavel had not yet been born when Chrétien de Troyes, around 1190, wrote his *'Conte du Graal'*, in which he introduced, for the

first time in literary history, the character of Perceval. Could it then be his father, Raymond-Roger? Simon de Montfort's victim died in 1209, and this identification holds no more water.

It is worth noting that the Razès region was also a frequent haunt of the Knights Templar, who had established a commandery there in Bézu. It would appear that these Knights Templar played a highly ambiguous role during the Albigensian Crusade. *They did not take part in it*, apparently keeping their distance from the affair. Furthermore, in 1209, they are said to have concluded an agreement with the d'Aniort family, who owned the Rennes-le-Château region. This agreement is said to have consisted of a fictitious transfer to the Templars of property belonging to the d'Aniort family and liable to be seized by the royal authorities, in particular Lavaldieu and Coume Sourde, which means that the Templars had agreed to help the Cathars of Razès. They had acted, in the previous century, in much the same way towards the Jews, as a document states that in 1142, those Jews of the Razès who owned land leased it to the Knights Templar.

In 1156, Bertrand de Blanchefort was elected Grand Master of the Order of **the Temple**.[6] It was then that the Templars based in Bézu brought over a veritable colony of German workers—metal smelters, to be precise—to work in the local mines. These mines, containing lead, silver, copper and gold – though of little significance, to be honest – had already been worked in Roman times. But what is surprising is that they brought in not miners, which would seem logical, but *smelters*. So what kind of work was involved? Moreover, these were not local people, nor even French: it is as though the intention had been to use workers who spoke a foreign language and could not be understood by the local population. One can therefore understand why there are so many local traditions concerning a hidden treasure in the vicinity of Rennes-le-Château. Sometimes, this is said to be magical gold guarded by the devil

[6] It was once believed that he was a member of a family from Razès, but in reality he belonged to the Blancafort family of Guyenne.

in a cave beneath Blanchefort Castle. Sometimes it is said to be the cursed gold of Toulouse. Sometimes it is said to be the Treasure of the Temple of Jerusalem. Sometimes it is said to be the Treasure of the Knights Templar. Sometimes it is even said to be the Holy Grail. But above all, it is said to be the Treasure of the Cathars.

All this is, of course, connected with Montségur. It is now established that the negotiations between the Inquisitors and the defenders of Montségur, Pierre-Roger de Mirepoix and Ramon de Perella, were conducted under the guarantee of Ramon d'Aniort, Lord of Rennes-le-Château and Rennes-les-Bains. We also know that after the escape of the four Parfaits tasked with transporting the 'Treasure' (whatever that may be), a fire was lit on the summit of Bidorta to warn the besieged inhabitants of Montségur that the operation had been successful. Now, this fire was lit by a man named Escot de Belcaire, a special envoy of Ramon d'Aniort. And it is highly likely that the four escapees were taken in and hidden in the Razès.

The d'Aniort family appears, moreover, to have played a discreet yet effective – and notably troubling – role in the affairs of Albi. Clearly, they were on the side of the Cathars during the Crusade of 1209. The four Aniort brothers – Géraud, Othon, Bertrand and Ramon – joined by two of their cousins, fiercely opposed Simon de Montfort and were, of course, excommunicated. Their castles were confiscated, but curiously, very shortly afterwards, the excommunication was lifted and they were even returned part of their estates. The castle of Aniort was to be razed to the ground, but at the last moment, Louis IX sent a messenger to call off the operation. Furthermore, we know that Ramon d'Aniort was received at court by Louis IX, who showed him surprising courtesy, considering that he was a rebel and an ally of heretics. Questions arise, which are unlikely ever to be resolved. Yet they allow us to put forward a hypothesis that corroborates another hypothesis concerning Blanche of Castile's leniency towards Raymond VII of Toulouse: it is possible that Ramon d'Aniort had in his

possession, or at the very least knew where a ‘treasure’ was to be found – in this case, documents proving the existence and survival of a Merovingian line, a legitimate dynasty that had been suppressed and driven out by the Carolingian usurpers and their successors, the Capetians. *It is merely a hypothesis*. It seems logical, and it would have the merit of explaining the ambiguous attitude of Louis IX and Blanche of Castile towards certain Cathar leaders or some of their allies, as well as their determination to seize the Occitan territories. This hypothesis would also have the merit of explaining the case of the enigmatic Abbé Béranger Saunière, parish priest of Rennes-le-Château from 1885 to 1917. Wishing to restore his church, the parish being very poor and he himself very destitute, he is said to have discovered, within a pillar, a ‘treasure’ that enabled him to carry out this restoration and even to undertake a rather strange embellishment of the sanctuary and its surroundings. Whatever the truth of the ‘treasure’ may be, Abbé Saunière suddenly became very wealthy, but never revealed where he had obtained this **fortune**[7]. Could he have sold certain documents, or at the very least promised, in return for payment, to keep them secret? This is another plausible hypothesis, but only a hypothesis; the only certainty is Abbé Saunière’s wealth and the projects he undertook.

In any case, the d’Aniort family protected the Cathars and the Knights Templar who were in the Razès region. The Voisins family, whom the king had appointed as ‘guardians’ of the Razès, were also on very good terms with the Templars, and one of the family members, during the persecution of the Templars instigated by Philip the Fair, managed to save a few of them, who took refuge in Spain.

Indeed, Philip the Fair was in the Razès in 1283. He was accompanying his father, King Philip the Bold, son of Saint Louis, on a journey through the Languedoc. The king stopped at the home of Pierre de Voisins, Lord of Rennes, who held

[7] See, from the same publisher, **The Sacred Enigma** by M. Baigeut, R. Leigh and H. Lincoln.

the whole of Razès on behalf of the kingdom. Philip the Bold's aim was to secure the neutrality of the local lords, some of whom were vassals of the King of Aragon, in a war he was preparing against Aragon. Hence his visit to Pierre de Voisins. But the king also visited Ramon d'Aniort and was very well received there, both by Ramon and by his wife Alix de Blanchefort, as well as by his younger brother Udaut d'Aniort, whom Philip the Fair would have liked to make his comrade-in-arms, but who preferred to become a Templar.

Why this visit to such a suspicious family? Two of Ramon's uncles were known Cathars, and Alix de Blanchefort was the daughter of a feudal lord branded a heretic and a sworn enemy of Simon de Montfort. Perhaps the aim was to arrange a marriage: indeed, Pierre III de Voisins, who was a widower, subsequently married Jordane d'Aniort, Ramon's cousin. Thus the two families became allied. But why this marriage, no doubt decided by the king, which in a sense rehabilitated the d'Aniorts?

Later, in 1422, Marcafava, heiress of the Voisins family, married Pierre-Raymond d'Hautpoul, heir to one of the oldest and most illustrious families in Occitania. Its founders had been known as the 'kings of the Montagne Noire'. At the time of the Albigensian Crusade, they had been stripped of their lands and castles for having protected the heretics. And in 1732, François d'Hautpoul married Marie de Negri d'Ables, who was the sole heiress to the estates of the d'Aniort family. They had three daughters: Élisabeth, who lived and died unmarried in Rennes-les-Bains; Marie, who married her cousin d'Hautpoul-Félines; and Gabrielle, who married the Marquis de Fleury.

However, Élisabeth d'Hautpoul had disputes with her sisters over the division of the estate. On this occasion, she refused to hand over the family papers and deeds to them, on the pretext that it was dangerous to examine these documents, and that it was necessary to 'have them deciphered and distinguish what constituted family deeds and what did not'. This seems to suggest

It is said that the d'Hautpouls, heirs to the D'Aniorts, had papers in their archives *that did not belong to the family* and that it was best not to look too closely at them. What were these mysterious papers? We will probably never know. It is said that in 1870, the notary with whom the family papers were deposited refused to hand them over to Pierre d'Hautpoul on the pretext that he could not part with such important documents without committing a grave act of negligence. And it is added that, among these documents, were genealogies bearing the seal of Blanche of Castile, proving the continuity of the Merovingian line. How can we know this, since the notary refused to hand over these documents? But all this is exasperating: from one coincidence to the next, we sink deeper into the mystery. And when Abbé Saunière made his discovery in the church at Rennes-le-Château – for he did indeed find *something* – it was claimed that it was Blanche of Castile's Treasure.

This means that, throughout this whole affair, we see clear and active collusion between the Cathars and the Knights Templar. Has it not been suggested – and, it would seem, with some justification – that the Knights Templar acted as the secular arm of the Cathars, who forbade themselves from bearing arms? In the Razès region, at any rate, it is evident that their collusion was in full swing.

They had built a formidable fortress at Bézu, the ruins of which can still be seen today. On the Lauzet plateau, south-east of Rennes-le-Château and north-east of Bézu, lies a site known as the 'Château des Templiers'. This is a recent name, as in 1830 the military map still referred to it as the 'ruins of Albedun'. Here, the name is Celtic, *albo-duno*, and curiously, it is translated into Franco-Occitan a few kilometres from Rennes-le-Château and Rennes-les-Bains, where it refers to the Château de Blanchefort, the ancestral home of the Blanchefort lineage. It is in

in effect a 'blanque fort', a 'white fortress'[8]. It is worth noting that throughout the territory of ancient Gaul, the sites of fortresses, camps, or even towns are referred to by a very common name: the White Town. And this is also the meaning of the name Vienne, in Isère, formerly *Vindobona*, 'the white enclosure', derived from other Gallic words, *vindo*, meaning 'white', and *bona*, meaning 'fortified enclosure'.

'Now, on the Lauzet plateau, I have identified the remains of three vast concentric enclosures, of which I was able to take striking photographs. They undoubtedly bear the Visigothic mark for several reasons: first of all, one can see so-called Cyclopean blocks there, each weighing three to four tonnes, which cannot therefore be mistaken for low walls; secondly, the remains of the walls feature the so-called 'fishbone' construction, characteristic of the Visigothic period and which was not used thereafter. This site therefore seems a more suitable candidate than the village of Rennes-le-Château itself as the location of the ancient Rhedae[9]."

It is indeed possible that the site of Albedun is the location of the ancient Rhedae. But it may just as easily have been one of many fortresses in this region, which lends itself very well to the establishment of numerous outposts on high ground to better monitor the surrounding area. In any case, this suggests that

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[8] Some claim that Bézu derives from *Albedun*, which is phonetically impossible. Moreover, the name *Bézu* (meaning 'birch' or 'tomb', as in Le Grand-Bé in Saint-Malo) is extremely widespread, and in places where there has never been a fortress.

[9] Jean-Luc Chaumeil, **Le trésor du triangle d'or**, Paris, A. Lefeuvre, 1979, p. 114. The author categorically rejects the theory that Limoux is the ancient Rhedae, which is what I personally believe. Indeed, the name *Rennes* cannot derive from the name *Rhedae*, as Jean-Luc Chaumeil and many others claim, in defiance of the simplest phonetics: where would the doubled *'n'* come from? *Rennes* is a form long established in French that logically derives from *Redones* (as in Ille-et-Vilaine), unless it comes from the second term of *Pagus Reddensis*, referring to the entire region and not just a stronghold. The evolved Occitan form is *Razès*, just as in modern Breton, Rennes is known as *Roazhon*. In the Razès, Rennes is a generic name that has been retained in this form for two localities, but Razès originally had the same meaning as *pagus*. On the other hand, *Rhedae* refers to a stronghold, but there is nothing to suggest that this refers to Rennes-le-Château.

The Razès is the perfect place to hide, whether it be fugitives or secrets. You can be sure they'll be well looked after.

And after all, why shouldn't the Cathars' 'Treasure' have been hidden in the church at Rennes-le-Château? In matters such as this, anything is possible: there is no evidence to support this argument, but there is no evidence to prove the contrary either. It would, moreover, be worthwhile to examine *the alterations* that Abbé Saunière made to his church and its surroundings following his famous discovery, regardless of the clergyman's actual motives, and above all without getting caught up in the quarrels and interpretations—as divergent as they are far-fetched—that have followed one another regarding this strange case since the Second World War.

This church has undergone numerous alterations, but the apse dates from the 12th century. It is the oldest part, which does not mean that there was not another sanctuary here before. It is dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene, which immediately lends it an Eastern flavour, as Mary Magdalene, according to tradition, landed in Provence bearing a message for the Western world. But, 'due to the misfortune of a flamboyant ugliness, which was unjustly labelled Sulpician, many a visitor has felt, in the small sanctuary overloaded with stucco, a sense of unease quite unexpected in a consecrated place. But how is one to collect one's thoughts and pray before these paintings, exaggerated to the point of vulgarity, these statues that would have deserved the curses of Huysmans in *The **Cathedral*"10**. And it begins outside, when one sees the inscription above the porch: *terribilis est locus iste*, that is to say 'this place is terrible', with this remark concerning the use of the Latin word *iste*, which carries a pejorative nuance or indicates possession in the second person. Are we to understand: 'terrible is this *ugly* place', or rather:
"terrible is *your* place"? Amateur of mysteries and the

[10] Jean Robin, *Rennes-le-Château, the Enchanted Hill*, Paris, G. Trédaniel, 1982, p. 28.

Those versed in phonetic Kabbalah will appreciate this and make their choice according to their own convictions.

I remember that sunny, almost sweltering day in September when I first arrived in Rennes-le-Château. Coming from Couiza, Marie Môn and I had followed the road that climbs up the mountainside to reach the other side, towards a new horizon. I really felt as though I were crossing a border, one of those mountain passes where, according to ancient legends, mysterious beings lie in wait to guide or mislead, depending on their mood, the travellers who venture that far. And we entered this sun-drenched hamlet, this closed-off town, this town that seemed dead, as if weighed down by a torpor rising from the bowels of the earth. At the tip of the promontory, the Magdala Tower jutted out against the sky and seemed to open up on the edge of an abyss onto a desolate landscape of rocky outcrops, crowned to the west by mountains with bluish peaks. A landscape as grand as any, yet somewhat unsettling: who might well be hiding in the valley, or behind those erratic boulders that one might mistake for warriors turned to stone by a holy magician, as was Saint Kornely in my country? And behind us, behind a screen of greenery, stood the church, barely taller than the houses, barely distinguishable in this slumbering mass.

At Montségur, I'd felt dizzy, overcome by a panic-stricken fear of heights. Here, there was no sense of height. And I sensed that it was inhabited. By ghosts, no doubt, by all those mysterious figures who had strayed into this land over the centuries. They had inevitably left their traces, and that was what I was trying to make out, without really believing I would succeed. Those ghosts were watching me, no doubt, waiting for a sign from me. But I did not want to make that gesture because I did not know the true nature of these beings. An excess of caution, no doubt, but one explained by the feeling I had of being watched by other beings—perfectly real ones—who knew who I was and who were wondering why I had abandoned the thickets of

Brocéliande, to lose myself in a labyrinth to which I should never have had **access**. But the weather was so lovely that day in Rennes-le-Château that I forgot to recite the litanies of the mist. We wanted to see the church: it was closed, and we had to wait until the afternoon to visit it. We had lunch under the trees, quietly, peacefully, fully aware that we were experiencing a special moment. A cheeky little girl flitted between the tables, between the trees, just as she flitted through the village streets. A strange little girl: her name was Morgane. You can't make things like that up, and I must admit that although I have lived, ever since my childhood, in the company of Merlin and the fairies of Brocéliande, they never miss an opportunity to remind me that they are my guides in the world of obscure realities.

We then made our way to the church. The church itself, the small park to the south of the chancel, and the cemetery form a curious ensemble that bears a certain resemblance to the famous The "parish enclosures" of Léon, in northern Finistère, minus the grandeur and beauty. For what strikes one above all here is the mediocrity of everything on display. The gateway leading to the cemetery, with a skull grinning with all twenty-two teeth, has a rather sordid air about it: where is the sober, sombre grandeur of the Breton 'triumphal porches', of which this is a crude imitation? Admittedly, there are some curious objects: a basin, a calvary whose cross stands in the middle of a circle as in ancient Egypt, a fake grotto, a resting place for the dead which is yet another imitation of Breton funerary art (the famous ossuary), and above all a statue of the Virgin on a reused plinth dating from the Carolingian period, recut, sawn and displayed *upside down*. One wonders why. We are told that all this is symbolic. Of course, all this is symbolic, since one can observe the use of symbols belonging to different traditions. But a motley mix of symbols

[11] This feeling reflected reality. Three months later, someone who had not been present that day gave me a detailed account of my visit to Rennes-le-Château.

does not necessarily mean anything: syncretism is always a degeneration that arises when one no longer knows the exact meaning of symbols and seizes upon them to *fabricate* mystery. And so what if there is a Masonic tomb in the cemetery: after all, the person buried there had every right to have a vault built according to his personal beliefs; there is nothing surprising about that.

As soon as I stepped inside the church, I was overcome by a sense of unease. At first glance, the whole place felt sinister, starting with that hideous statue of the devil Asmodeus standing near the door. His bulging eyes are turned downwards, staring at the black-and-white floor tiles. He has one knee bent – the left one, of course – and is carrying a heavy holy water font. His right hand forms a circle and once held a pitchfork: this is a very conventional image of a devil. Above, four angels each perform a part of the sign of the Cross, and on the plinth are inscribed these words: '*By this sign thou shalt conquer* him', and also, within a small circle, the two letters B. S., which are the initials of the parish priest Béranger Saunière.

On the back wall, towards the top, a fresco depicts Christ on a flower-covered mountain, surrounded by numerous figures; at the foot of the mountain is a sort of torn sack from which grains of wheat appear to be spilling out, and in the background a landscape in which several villages can be made out. It has been suggested that this depicts the surroundings of Rennes-le-Château and that the grains of wheat symbolise the fabled 'treasure' hidden there. On either side of the chancel, plaster statues in the purest pre-war Saint-Sulpician tradition, representing Joseph and Mary, each hold the infant Jesus, which seems odd. One also discovers a statue and a painting depicting Mary Magdalene, patron saint of the church, with a human skull resting on an open book at her feet. As for the Stations of the Cross, one immediately notices an anomaly: they are in fact arranged exactly the opposite way round to what is usually done in all churches. And amongst the other statues, ugly and devoid of

Interestingly, there are two Saint Antons depicted: one is Saint Anthony of Padua, the other is Saint Anthony the Hermit, and the latter is holding a closed book.

What is Cathar, or at least Cathar in spirit, about all this? Very little, in truth. The prominent presence of the devil perhaps serves as a reminder that the Cathars believed in the existence of a principle of Evil embodied by Satan, a sort of god of Evil standing in opposition to the god of Good. This dualistic conception is also illustrated by the two Saint Antons, and above all by the two infant Jesuses. It has been suggested that the child held by Joseph represents the male element—that is, *what is apparent*—and that the child held by Mary represents the female element, the subtle element—that is, *what is hidden*. Why not? This could also illustrate a belief found in certain Cathar texts: Jesus and Satan are *the two sons* of God the Father, the two manifestations of a divinity that is both good and evil. This aspect of Cathar doctrine, which is generally overlooked by commentators and which would demonstrate that Catharism is in reality a false dualism and an authentic *monism*, seems to have been deliberately highlighted in this church by this unusual pair.

But what throws everything off is the deliberate inversion, which is already evident on the exterior with the Carolingian plinth placed upside down. Joseph is on the left as you face the altar, on the *left-hand* side: in the past, women's places during ceremonies were on this *left-hand* side, and it was on the north façade that the devil and scenes of 'devilry' – so common in medieval cathedral sculpture – were depicted. Here, in this Church of St Mary Magdalene, Joseph—*the appearance*, the man—is on the left: is the child he carries therefore Satan? And is the child carried by Mary, on the right—thus the *hidden reality*—the Jesus of the Gospel? But then, why is the grotesque statue of Satan on the right, and why is the Way of the Cross reversed? A visit to this church leaves one with a curious impression, an unsettling feeling: this sanctuary seems more suited to a black mass than to a 'normal' mass.

There is only one other church, of similar dimensions, that can be compared to Sainte-Marie-Madeleine in Rennes-le-Château: the church of Sainte-Onenne in Tréhorenteuc (Morbihan), in the Forest of Brocéliande. I know it well, having been involved to some extent in its restoration and decoration, which are very recent, and which took place not under the same circumstances as those at Rennes-le-Château, but according to a somewhat parallel process. But at Tréhorenteuc, even if the artistic quality remains debatable, the situation is clear: this is not a matter of dualism, let alone a
'treasure', and there is no ambiguity in the symbolic apparatus.

What is striking about Rennes-le-Château is the accumulation of details that appear to follow a logical sequence but, upon closer examination, prove to be inconsistent, or even contradictory. Furthermore, there are clear references to Masonic and Rosicrucian symbols. Clearly, the ground, which resembles a chessboard with its white and black squares, oriented towards the four cardinal points, evokes the
The Freemasons' 'mosaic paving stone'. It is true that one can still find an allusion to dualism here: the chess game is a clash between the sons of Light and the sons of Darkness. Why not? In any case, Manichaeism is embedded in the place names: opposite the ruined citadel of Blanchefort stands the jagged ridge of Roco Negro. But there are other Masonic allusions: the eighth station of the Way of the Cross, where a woman wearing a widow's veil holds the hand of a child dressed in tartan, and the ninth station features a horseman who has no business being there, but who evokes the rank of Knight Benefactor of the Holy City of the Rectified Scottish Rite. Furthermore, roses and crosses adorn all the stations of the Way of the Cross; this is no coincidence. It should also be noted that one of the best-known members of the d'Hautpoul family, François, was, in the 19th century, Venerable Master of the 'Carbonari' Lodge in Limoux. Furthermore, it is worth noting that, as a result of Antonin Gadal's fantasies about the Grail

In the Sabarthès region, a Rosicrucian sect established a settlement in Ussat-les-Bains, and even erected a monument there to Galahad, son of Lancelot of the Lake, the discoverer of the Cistercian Grail. In Montségur, one finds the Cathars, the legend of the Grail and the
'Nordics', not to mention the Nazis. In the Sabarthès, one finds the Cathars, the legend of the Grail and the Rosicrucians. In the Razès, one finds everything: the Cathars, the Templars, the Freemasons, the Rosicrucians, the legend of the Grail, the Merovingians and, of course, the 'Nordics', though these are far more British in character, no doubt due to the Scottish origins of Freemasonry. And then there are the Druids – yes, really – whom I thought had disappeared at least fifteen hundred years ago.

'The Aude has always been a welcoming land for magicians and sorcerers, and the Bishopric of Carcassonne would certainly not contradict us if we were to claim that *forbidden practices* (at least as things stood when the Inquisition was at its height) are undoubtedly more prevalent here than elsewhere. Abbé Saunière, a native of the region and, as we were told, so close to the people, could not have been unaware that the majority of witchcraft rites are simply religious rites performed *in reverse*, and all folklorists, if not exorcists, have in their archives an abundance of prayers recited backwards and tales of old women walking the Stations of the Cross backwards whilst uttering inaudible **threats**[12]."

Furthermore, we know that Father Saunière travelled to Paris, ostensibly to have the documents he had found in his church examined by Father Bieil, the director of Saint-Sulpice, that there he met a future priest well-versed in esotericism, Émile Hoffet, that he frequented the singer Emma Calvé, with whom he became involved, and a circle of visionaries and Hermeticists gathered around genuine artists such as Claude Debussy, Stéphane Mallarmé and Maurice Maeterlinck—in short, the *Symbolist and Decadent milieu* whose links with

[12] Jean Robin, *Rennes-le-Château*, p. 144.

The members of the Theosophical Society, along with the Freemasons (of the Scottish Rite) and the Rosicrucians, are well known. This very Parisian circle has recently discovered Wagner, and in particular **Parzival**. And this was the era when medieval texts such as The *Quest for the Holy Grail* and *Tristan and Iseult* were being translated and published, as well as previously unknown works from ancient Celtic, Welsh and Irish literature. It is no secret that Maeterlinck and Debussy's *Pelléas* (whose name is that of the Fisher King) is a lyrical *initiatory* drama built upon a Germanic-Celtic foundation. In short, Abbé Béranger Saunière was the bridge linking the worldly and intellectual occultism of Paris to the operative sorcery of the Razès. Was he capable of this?

Looking closely at what he did to the church in Rennes-le-Château, the answer can only be no. Abbé Saunière merely reproduced, at face value and with truly exceptional bad taste, the teachings he had received. Unless all of this was merely a smokescreen.

For such an accumulation of ugliness, of disparate symbols, and of childish inversions, is far too striking to have been the result of chance. The Church of Sainte-Marie-Madeleine in Rennes-le-Château is nothing more than a vulgar decoy designed to divert attention. The Cathars' 'Treasure' must necessarily lie elsewhere, and it is a waste of time to search for the map leading to it in this church, which is a veritable 'synagogue of Satan'.

But Rennes-le-Château is not the whole of the Razès. It is not even the ancient Rhedae. There are other places in this strange and magnificent land. There is not just one Rennes, there are two. Why forget Rennes-les-Bains, which was, quite clearly, a place of worship in Gallic times, and which harbours many mysteries, even though they possess that quality peculiar to mysteries, namely silence? It is true that in the public eye, Abbé Saunière, parish priest of Rennes-le-Château, has completely eclipsed Abbé Boudet, parish priest of Rennes-les-Bains, his

a colleague and, nonetheless, a friend, who was guilty of leading a simple life, free from any scandal.

It would be a mistake to overlook Rennes-les-Bains. It is a remarkable little spa town, worn down by time, slowly falling into disrepair amidst the indifference of the few spa-goers who still come to 'take the **waters'**[13]. This little village, nestled in the valley in a green hollow that contrasts with the aridity of the neighbouring plateau, possesses a strange, perfectly old-fashioned charm, with the flavour of a bygone era for which one feels a nostalgia not without its pleasures. Here, one feels as though in another world, in another century, in a cosy calm disturbed only by the sound of the Sals waterfalls, whose course runs the entire length of the town and which serves as a timely reminder of the existence of numerous salt springs.

In Rennes-les-Bains, there is indeed a thermal spring known as 'Bain de la Reine', with a tradition claiming that it is so named after Queen Blanche of Castile, who is said to have come here for treatment. The water emerges at 41°C, has a distinctly salty taste, and analysis reveals a fairly high sodium chloride content. A little further on, at the source of La Madeleine, or La Gode, a sulphurous component is added to the salt. It is known that, since Gallic times, there have been important places of worship around saltwater springs, as evidenced by the Fontaines Salées in Saint-Père-sous-Vézelay, Burgundy, or Salins in the Jura, not far from the authentic Alésia, which is a fortress-sanctuary. This confirms the role of Rennes-les-Bains as the true religious centre of the entire Razès region. Strange memories are concentrated here: that of Blanche of Castile, once again, and behind her, the shadow of the White Lady, in other words the Water Fairy who dwells in a cave, a folkloric image of an ancient goddess of the

[13] A detail that is certainly picturesque: on the façade of a spa hotel that is currently closed, one can read a list of the ailments treated there, and among them, *catarrh*. No, you couldn't make it up, especially in a country where puns are rife, not to mention 'bird language'.

Druidic times; the memory of Mary Magdalene, a thoroughly obscure figure whose legend lends itself to interpretations that could lead very far; and finally that of a divine entity known to us, thanks to Caesar who names him Apollo, and who is not a sun god, but an Apollo *Grannus* (whose name is found in Granès), the equivalent of the Irish god Diancecht, who, to heal the wounded or resurrect the dead, had, according to an epic tale in Gaelic, created a 'Fountain of **Health'**[14].

And then, the church is well worth a visit. You enter through an arched doorway, and once inside, you really feel as though you are in a place of contemplation and prayer, rather than a chaotic jumble, as at Rennes-le-Château. This church is characterised by a simplicity that borders on Jansenist austerity. Largely restored, well maintained and uncluttered by various frivolities, it speaks to those who know how to listen. And also to those who know how to look. For there is a rather strange, quite old painting there, depicting *Christ with the Hare*. It is a painting donated to the church by Paul-Urbain de Fleury, like so many other works given to shrines by benefactors. But this *Christ with the Hare* cannot be there by chance. One realises, moreover, that it is a slightly modified and, above all, *inverted* copy of a canvas painted by Van Dyck in 1636, which is kept at the Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp.

As for the cemetery, it contains a curious grave, or rather a double grave: indeed, there are two burial plots attributed to the same man, the donor of the painting, Paul-Urbain de Fleury, whose dates of birth and death engraved on the monuments are contradictory, and on which the following inscription can be read: 'He passed away doing good', an inscription unquestionably inspired by Rosicrucianism. Why these deliberate errors in the dates? Why two tombs for one and the same individual? Which of the two is the correct one? Just as

[14] Jean Markale, *Le Druidisme*, Paris, Payot, 1985.

questions that all those in search of the 'Treasure' should be asking themselves.

Further north, on the road from Couiza to Arques, in the parish of Peyrolles, there is also an isolated tomb that has sparked much controversy. It appears to have served as a model for the 17th-century painter Nicolas Poussin in his painting **The Shepherds of Arcadia**, now in the Louvre in Paris. One recognises the same landscape and the same shape of the monument, and the painter has his shepherds decipher an identical inscription: *Et in Arcadia ego*, which *literally* means: 'I am in Arcadia'. ' And this same inscription is said to have appeared on a tomb in Rennes-le-Château, that of the Marquise d'Hautpoul, but Abbé Saunière is said to have made it disappear by scraping the stone. It is all rather confusing. Mystery enthusiasts explain that Nicolas Poussin, who was an initiate (of what?), would have deliberately used this tomb as a model. But on closer inspection, it seems that the opposite is true: the tomb on the road to Arques was fabricated based on Poussin's painting. *It is a forgery*. But that solves nothing, for one might ask: why this forgery? Especially since Poussin's painting exists, remains highly enigmatic, and its origins are shrouded in mystery.

In 1656, Nicolas Fouquet, then Superintendent of Finances to Louis XIV, had instructed Abbé Louis Fouquet, his younger brother, to contact the painter Nicolas Poussin, who was sixty-two years old, in Rome, to commission a painting from him. The abbot replied to the Superintendent, stating that Poussin had agreed, but that he had planned something which he could not reveal in a letter. And the terms of this letter, if it is not a forgery (there are so many forgeries in the history of the Razès that one must be wary of everything), are rather curious. The abbot speaks indeed of 'matters of which I shall be able to speak to you at length shortly, which will afford you, through Mr Poussin, advantages that kings would find it very difficult to extract from him, and which, after him, perhaps no one in the world will regain in the centuries to come…'. However, Nicolas Fouquet was arrested in 1661,

As is well known, he was dismissed by royal decree and replaced by Colbert, for reasons that have never really been clarified.

So what is it all about? What are these *things* through which Fouquet might have gained an advantage over King Louis XIV? Follow my gaze: the genealogies bearing the seal of Blanche of Castile, authenticating the Merovingian line, are not far away. Is that what the 'Treasure' is? We are definitely going round in circles. Furthermore, we know that Colbert ordered certain searches to be carried out in the region's archives and that he also had excavations undertaken. Under these circumstances, it matters little whether the tomb predates or postdates Poussin's painting: the problem remains the same.

Then there is the church at Bézu. The building itself is of little interest, but one does come across a motif there that one subconsciously expected to find in the Razès: the Grail. The date of this painting is uncertain, but it cannot predate the 16th century. It is therefore not Cathar. Yet this chalice – though it may be a stretch to call it the Grail – is curious in that it is depicted as the Templars' Beaucéant, in black and white. It is true that a Templar commandery was located in the Bézu region. And we know that the Templars, or at least their successors, are said to have been the initiators of the Masonic movement. Here too, we are going round in circles.

Finally, there is Bugarach. This is the name of a mountain peak 1,230 metres high, and of a village, both situated south-east of Rennes-les-Bains, the village having presumably given its name to the mountain. But here, we come directly to the history of the Cathars.

The village appears to have been given its name in the 11th century, if we are to believe a charter dating from 889 confirming the holdings of the abbots of Saint-Polycarpe (Aude), in which the name appears in the Latinised form *burgaragio*. In 1231, the form *Bugaaragium* is found; in 1500, *Bigarach*; in 1594, *Bugaraïch*; in 1647, *Beugarach*; the current form being established in 1781.

What, then, is the meaning of this place name, which is not unique, since it is found south of Toulouse in the form Bougaroche, and near Bordeaux in the form Bougarach? The root could be the Germanic root *burg*, meaning 'fortress' (equivalent to *the* Celtic *duno*), but this root was never used in Occitania in ancient times. It is more likely that it is a word derived from an ethnic term which, during the Middle Ages, gave rise to words such as *bulgari*, *bugares*, *burgars*, *bougres*, as well as the modern French *bulgare*. Eighth-century chronicles record conflicts between the Franks, the Avars and the Bulgars. And in 1201, a monk from the Abbey of Saint-Marien in Auxerre reported a 'heresy known as Bulgarian' and 'heretics known as Bulgarians'. In 1207, the same monk wrote that 'the heresy of the Bulgarians has spread'. There can be no doubt about these Bulgarian heretics: they are the Cathars, who, as is now certain, are the successors of the Bogomil heretics, who originated in Bulgaria and passed through Byzantium before spreading throughout Western Europe.

Thus, Bugarach could well bear witness to an early settlement of the 'Bougres' (the term has survived, albeit with a pejorative connotation) in the Razès region. This is a logical explanation and is highly likely to be the correct one. Furthermore, there appears to be a connection between Bugarach and Montségur, and Fernand Niel puts forward an intriguing hypothesis on this point. He suggests that the builders – or rebuilders – of the Cathar Montségur, around 1200, may have deliberately aligned the fortress with the average position of sunrise. Now, 'this west-east direction points to the Pech de Bugarach, the highest point in the Corbières, whose altitude, 1,231 m, is very close to that of Montségur, and whose latitude, 42° 52', is equal to that of the site… As they narrowed their west-east alignment, they could see the summit of Bugarach looming at the end of their line of sight.

‘When called upon in this way, they would have definitively adopted this point of reference provided by **nature’15**.

If we accept this hypothesis and consider the probable etymology of the name, the Pech de Bugarach would be a sort of counterpart to Montségur. Unless, of course, the opposite is true: but in any case, there is an obvious and special connection between the two peaks, just as there is one between the *Bougres* and the Cathars. At this point, it is no longer a hypothesis but a certainty: one can quite rightly assert that Bugarach – the mountain and the village – played a leading role in the establishment of Catharism not only in the Razès, but throughout Occitania. If Bugarach predates Montségur, perhaps – and this is a new hypothesis – it should be seen as a central sanctuary, a sort of primitive *omphalos* around which the heresy developed. It is therefore not a secret hiding place for a possible Cathar ‘Treasure’, but a sacred mountain, analogous to the famous Mount Meru, a true axis around which the dualistic universe revolves, much like, in Ireland, around the sacred hill of Tara, where not only the major religious traditions – first the Druidic, then Christian, but also the structures of Gaelic society and its division into multiple kingdoms, each reflecting its distinctiveness back onto the absolute ideal centre.

A strange work, a little-known novel by an author who is nonetheless world-renowned, can help us understand the role of ‘*omphalos*’ that the site of Bugarach may have played. It is a novel by Jules Verne entitled **Clovis Dardentor**. Jules Verne, a Breton from Nantes, apart from his undeniable literary talent and brilliant imagination, was passionate about parallel or secret sciences. This is evident throughout all his works, even in the most ‘accessible’ and popular ones, and is hinted at in more ‘convoluted’ novels such as *Twenty Thousand Leagues*

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15 Fernand Niel, *Les Cathares de Montségur*, Paris, Seghers, 1976.

Under the Seas, which is a rite-of-passage journey in the style of the famous 'voyages' of Irish tradition; *The Mysterious Island*, which draws on the myth of the Isle of Avalon; or *The Black Indies*, whose Masonic inspiration is well established. Jules Verne was himself one of the 'Children of the Widow', or a 'Son of Light', if you prefer, in all likelihood. And even if he was not an initiate, he associated with many Freemasons, including his publisher Hetzel, a most curious character, Jean Macé and his friend Hignard, with whom he travelled to Scotland. And he was well acquainted with the doctrines and practices of the Rosicrucians: his novel *Robur the Conqueror* bears witness to this, if only through the initials of his hero, R. C.

That said, the novel *Clovis Dardentor* contains some strange adventures: it is a quest for treasure, undertaken by characters whose names alone serve as **clues**.[16] This quest takes place at sea and on land, in a country specifically named as North Africa, which, in reality, is merely a transposition of the Razès, near Rennes-le-Château. How did Jules Verne know about the Razès? Probably through his Masonic and Rosicrucian friends, and also through a certain Jules Doinel, chief curator of the Aude archives, who published, under a pseudonym, the ritual of the enthronement of the
C.B.C.S. (Chevalier Bienfaisant de la Cité Sainte), the highest rank in the Rectified Scottish Rite, who played a significant role as an inspiration to Abbé Béranger Saunière. Furthermore, Jules Doinel was *the bishop* of an agnostic sect somewhat suspected of Luciferian tendencies. In short, it's the same old story all over again. Going round in circles around the church of Rennes-le-Château.

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[16] See on this subject Michel Lamy's book, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, Paris, Payot, 1984. It contains a wealth of detail on this issue, as well as some very interesting insights. But the book should be read with caution, as the author does not seem to distinguish between serious information and the ramblings of certain enthusiasts, which he takes at face value without verifying their authenticity. This is a great pity, for Michel Lamy deserves great credit for having opened up new horizons regarding an author whom everyone thought they knew and who ultimately proves to be very complex.

But Jules Verne does not merely superimpose the Razès region onto the Oran countryside, starting from Sète and passing through the Balearic Islands. In Oran, whose name obviously evokes *gold*, and which he calls the
'Gouharan des Arabes' – a name reminiscent of the village of Gourg d'Auran, in the municipality of Quillan – the heroes find themselves at the *Vieux Château*, in the *Blanca* district. There is mention of the 'Queen's Bath', near Mers-el-Kébir, whose waters have a 'distinctly salty' taste, with 'a faint smell of sulphur'. One could cite many more references of this kind.

What is most important in this novel is the character of the captain of the ship carrying the story's heroes. What is distinctive about him is that he never leaves his ship: and yet he is the driving force, the one who seems to direct everything and guide the others. One always strives to find a
'good seat at the table', that is to say, near the captain. And Jules Verne specifies that under his command, 'there is nothing to fear. The favourable wind is in his hat, and he need only take it off to have a broad reach'. These words are very clear: it is the captain who knows the direction and who is the master of the winds. You may be surprised to learn that the name of this strange captain is *Bugarach*.

What conclusions can we draw from all this? Nothing definite, if we wish to show even the slightest respect for historical truth and not fabricate stories at any cost about matters that may not be worth the effort. Yet, all the same, there are too many coincidences for them all to be mere chance; that much is certain.

The Razès, particularly within the quadrilateral formed by Couiza, Arques, Granès and Bugarach, is a region full of mysteries. *Everything there is false*, or almost everything, just like in the Forest of Brocéliande in Armorican Brittany: apocryphal documents, legends imported at a later date, monuments falsified, reconstructed or fabricated for the sake of the cause, delusional commentaries – it's all there. Yes, everything is false. Except for *one* thing. In the Forest of Brocéliande, the only thing that is not *false* is undoubtedly the Barenton spring. Here, what is it?

As in Brocéliande, everything is arranged to draw the eye towards very wide paths that disappear completely into the undergrowth. In certain versions of the Quest for the Grail, knights in search of the sacred object are sometimes received in castles that bear all the hallmarks of the Castle of the Grail. But they soon realise they are traversing the enchanted domains of Klingsor. Or of Merlin, the master of illusion, yet *the one who knows*, for he is the embodiment of the primordial druid. If I had to describe the Razès in a single word, I would say it is a *bewildering* land.

Is this the Cathars' ultimate trap?

A local legend from Rennes-les-Bains claims that when the rocks of Laval-Dieu turn, the end of time will come. There are many other eschatological traditions of this kind all over the place. But in a land that undoubtedly witnessed the last Cathars of Occitania, the end of time can only come once the last human soul has been saved: then humanity will have regained the angelic state it lost at the dawn of time, and the stones, freed from the burden of a now unthinkable Satan, will be able to turn towards the new dawn.

PART TWO

Who were the Cathars?

I

DUALISM

Catharism is not a religion that emerged suddenly as a result of the preaching of a prophet who gathered around him an initial group of followers who would put the master's teachings into practice. Catharism is not what is known as a 'revealed' religion. It is the result of the long maturation of a school of thought that is not specific to Christianity. Moreover, whilst the Cathars were regarded as heretics—that is, as deviants from Christianity—and treated as such by the defenders of orthodoxy, it is not certain that one can objectively regard it as a Christian religion. Catharism borrows many elements from Christianity—a certain tradition, texts which it reinterprets—but it is difficult to claim that it constitutes a genuine deviation from Christian doctrine.

The school of thought of which it is the culmination has existed in all religious systems since the earliest antiquity: it is *dualism*, that is to say, the theory that the universe, and everything connected with it in one way or another, is the result of a conflict between two opposing principles. This formulation is, of course, a simplification: in reality, matters are far more complex, if only because of the nuances inherent in the conception of the two principles themselves, and in the assessments made regarding the interaction between these two principles. In this field, speculations are countless, and sometimes contradictory. And the Cathar themselves, especially in the

13th century, according to all accounts, did not escape these contradictions.

For Catharism does not present itself as a firmly established religion, with a recognised and definitive dogma regarded as official. Moreover, there is no absolute hierarchy among the Cathars, as there is in the Roman Church. There are Cathar 'churches' and, often, as many divergent interpretations as there are churches. First and foremost, there is a fundamental distinction between those who profess absolute dualism and those who lean towards relative dualism, a distinction that can only become apparent if one approaches the issue as closely as possible to its origins.

It is likely that this problem began to take shape as soon as humanity, freeing itself from the three concerns
"biological" needs (to feed, protect oneself and procreate), began to reflect on its destiny. This inevitably led to speculation that could already be described as metaphysical, since the realisation of death highlighted a principle that was necessarily evil, and thus the idea of a struggle against this principle and an anguished questioning of what happens afterwards. At a basic level, death cannot be justified: we have not yet reached the point of viewing life *and* death as two sides of the same reality; we merely observe that there is life and there is death, and that these two states are in stark opposition, just as night is opposed to day, cold to heat, and pain to pleasure.

All mythologies echo, to a greater or lesser extent, these early metaphysical speculations. Mythologies, in whatever form they take—whether epic or visual—translate abstract concepts belonging to a tradition—that is to say, a body of beliefs, memories, observations and social structures—into easily communicable images. It is certainly very difficult to disentangle, in the mythological narratives that have come down to us mostly in a literary form—and thus elaborate, scholarly, codified, and perhaps altered—what is ancient from what is recent. When

When we talk about Greek mythology, for example, are we referring to the mythology of the Hellenistic period or that of the Archaic period? Even in Hesiod, who was the first to have 'staged' the relationships between the gods themselves and between the gods and men, yet who was also already the heir to a long tradition, there is room for doubt regarding the very structures of the myths depicted. In truth, this is an interpretation of the myth and not the myth itself. Does this mean that the myth is incomprehensible? Certainly, since it constitutes an abstract entity which, in order to be transmitted, requires materialisation in the form of historical events. Thus, in all mythological narratives, we find conflicts, unending wars, crimes and catastrophes that cannot be taken literally, but which serve as points of reference for an intellectual approach.

In this Greek mythology, at least as we know it from Hesiod, we find traces of a primitive dualism in the conflict that emerges between Cronus and Zeus. The son, Zeus, rebels against his father, Cronus. He takes his father's place and castrates him, castration being the symbolic equivalent of death. But the conflict existed in a latent state within Kronos himself: the theme of the father who gives life to his children and devours them once they are born is already sufficiently ambiguous in itself. And it is this that poses the real problem.

Indeed, Chronos has two contradictory attitudes; even though the narrative claims that it is because of a prophecy that he would be dethroned by one of his children that he swallows them—that is to say, he *represses* them within himself, into his unconscious. He can therefore be both the giver of life and the bringer of death, and this exists entirely beyond his conscious will: it is a far more secret law, the least expressible of all, which gives meaning to this paradoxical attitude, hence the emergence of the notion of Necessity, of Fate, to which both gods and men are subject. Khronos is therefore not all-powerful, since contradictory forces are at work within him. Does this mean

that the figure of the primordial god (Chronos, in the Theogony, is not the primordial god, but he plays that role) contains both life and death? One might be tempted to believe so.

In any case, the conflict is built much more around this ambivalent aspect of Khronos than around the war waged by the Olympians against the rebellious Titans or against the Giants storming Mount Olympus. This war is merely one of the effects of Chronos's *duality*, passed down through his descendants or inherent in beings of the same nature as him (Chronos is himself a Titan). The same holds true in Germanic mythology, according to the late yet archaic texts revealed by the Icelanders: the struggle between the Aesir gods and the Vanir gods is merely the result of a conflict that highlights the internal contradictions of divinity, contradictions which are subsequently re-enacted through the insidious and almost unconscious rivalry between Odin-Wotan and the enigmatic Loki—a dynamic which Wagner, incidentally, captured magnificently in his *Ring Cycle*. And although Celtic mythology does not, strictly speaking, contain a theogony, we also find wars between two rival factions of gods, if only those which, in the Irish epic, pit the Tuatha Dé Danann against the Fir Bolg, two successive invaders of the island of Ireland.

In reality, these spectacular battles are merely very minor manifestations. Greek mythology no longer reflects – because certain elements must have been lost – the true conflict between the two opposing forces. On the other hand, it is clearly recognised in the mythological epics of the Germanic and Celtic peoples, epics that are less literary, perhaps less scholarly, and closer to a tradition lived out in everyday life.

Among the Germanic peoples, the world exists only because the gods, having built the fortress of Asgard, hold back the Giants, powers of the shadows, who are merely waiting for an opportunity to launch an assault on the divine stronghold, destroy it and thus destroy the universe. It is why Odhin-Wotan sends his

Valkyries onto the battlefields of mankind to gather the souls of the most valiant warriors and take them to Valhalla (*Valhöll*), which serves as a reserve of fighters, the bulwark necessary to protect the survival of the world alongside its balance. And this balance is unstable, constantly being challenged.

Among the Celts, according to Irish tradition, the gods, whoever they may be, must constantly battle against the mysterious Fomorians, a vaguely defined people who live somewhere beyond the seas and who constantly threaten the balance of the world. Defeated several times in mythological history, the Fomorians reappear at different times: they are constantly present in the shadows, in the unconscious, ready to emerge at the slightest sign of weakness. Their monstrous appearance makes them the equivalent of the Giants, but they are also something else: the power of negation that exists within the gods themselves, who, without their threat, would be unable to assert their existence.

The difference between the Celtic and Germanic traditions is, however, evident in the hypothetical outcomes of the conflict. Among the Germanic peoples, Odin-Wotan knows that the battle is lost before it has even begun, and his actions are aimed solely at delaying the inevitable as long as possible, at buying time. And Germanic eschatology seems rather grim: the destruction of the world by fire, with a single hope—perhaps introduced later into the tradition—the birth of a new world ruled by the mysterious son of Odin-Wotan, the young Baldr, killed because of Loki's treachery, but who will be resurrected. Among the Celts, on the other hand, there seems to be no eschatology: the final battle is averted thanks to the appearance of a god of a class and function of his own, Lug the Many-Artisan, who is *both Fomorian and Tuatha Dé Danann*, and who thus embodies both contradictory natures himself.

In any case, the underhand rivalry between Loki and Odin-Wotan, like the dual nature of the Celtic Lug, raises the fundamental issue beneath an anecdotal façade. How can a deity

who, by definition, can only be perfect, is sometimes led to commit acts that appear imperfect. In other words, how can a god be both good and evil, given that Goodness—sacralised and placed at the very top of the scale of values—is supposed to be the very essence of that god? All religions, all theological systems, have posited the existence of an infinitely intelligent, infinitely good god, and it is difficult to understand how, all of a sudden, this good god could commit evil, or at the very least allow the parallel existence within him, or alongside him, of a being who is certainly infinitely intelligent, but also infinitely evil.

All theologians, all ideologues of all past, present – and future – religions have grappled – or will grapple – with the fundamental problem that has haunted humanity ever since it became aware of its condition: the problem of the existence of evil. In Genesis, the subject is evoked by the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the myth is highly significant. Before eating the fruit of this tree, Adam and Eve were happy in the Garden of Eden. After eating the fruit, they found themselves unhappy and were forced to leave the Garden of Eden.

In psychological terms, the Fall—whatever its motivations and whatever the reason for the prohibition—consists of a realisation. We can understand that, previously, humanity lived in a state of perfect innocence, unable to distinguish between right and wrong. Once an event occurred – the human being began to reflect on their fate and became suddenly aware of a dichotomy – everything changed: and it became impossible to remain any longer in the Garden of Paradise. We are told that Adam and Eve were ashamed to see themselves naked, that is to say, in the reality of their condition. An unbearable sight: awakened from their golden dream, they realised they were imperfect in a perfect universe. All that remained for them was to go into exile. The flaming sword of

is nothing other than the awareness they then had of their unworthiness.

But they could only grasp this indignity in relation to a higher value. It is always on the basis of certain criteria that we form an attitude of appreciation. Adam and Eve—whatever meanings these symbolic figures may embody—did *appreciate*. And to appreciate, one must *be conscious*. If, previously, they had been incapable of appreciating, it was because they were not conscious. During this brutal separation from their former tranquillity, they discovered unhappiness, suffering, death, and Evil in a general sense. But in discovering Evil, they also discovered Good, the latter being the memory of their former state, now projected forward as an ideal to be attained, a hope to be lived, and thus an absolute value in contrast to the relative value they had previously attributed to themselves. Let us go further: before the 'fall', Adam was *one*; after the 'fall', he found himself *as two*. And yet the *two* were within the *one*. It is as though, in the context of a fantasy tale, he had torn his double from himself and that this double had begun to live independently, in parallel yet also in opposition. We recall the tale of *the Man Who Lost His Shadow*: from the moment his shadow began to live autonomously, it no longer had any reason to follow the man of whom it was the shadow. Yet the shadow did not thereby become a being in its own right, whilst the man lost a significant part of what constituted his being. Nothing is right anymore, for either of them.

The text of Genesis, though it gives rise to numerous commentaries and multiple interpretations, remains deeply obscure: it merely notes that at a certain point in human history, people suddenly shifted from a state of carefreeness to a state of *anxiety*. People felt guilty. Guilty of what? We have no idea. But guilt implies fault, and a fault is undoubtedly

a failure to live up to something, a failure to live up to a higher reality.

The theme of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is not the only obscure one in the biblical text concerning the 'Fall'. When we are told that the Angels, seduced by the beauty of women, descended to earth and united with them, thus begetting Giants who populated the world before the Flood, plunging it into ignominy, one might wonder, setting aside any rationalising explanation involving 'aliens', whether this is not a fiction symbolising the imprisonment of celestial souls within matter—an element that features prominently in the thought of Plato, in that of Pythagoras, and in Cathar doctrine.

Moreover, the angels who 'know' the daughters of men are not referred to as such: the text speaks of the 'sons of God', and there is absolutely no mention in this verse (6:2) of the cherubim who, in verse 3:24, guard the way to the Tree of Life. Angelicology is confusing in the Bible, particularly in Genesis, where *the Enemy* is not even mentioned. It is not the tempting Serpent: the latter is merely 'the most cunning of all the beasts of the field which the Lord God had made' (3:1). And if one equates the Serpent with Satan, one is forced to acknowledge that he is a creature emanating from God. Indeed, how is it that God could have created an *evil* being?

Official texts say nothing about the rebellion of Satan, the greatest and most beautiful of the archangels. Moreover, they are equally vague regarding the existence of these Higher Beings. The Cherubim appear abruptly without our knowing who they are. Unless, taking the famous *Elohim* of verse 1:2—which we strive to translate as 'the Spirit of God' when it is in fact a plural word meaning 'the lords'— we must understand that the Eternal God of the Hebrew Bible is merely the first – *primus inter pares* – of a mysterious cohort of Higher Beings, archangels, cherubim and seraphim. Does not the Serpent say to Adam and Eve: 'If you eat of this fruit, you will be like gods, knowing good and

'evil' (3:5)? And after the Fall, the Lord God utters these ambiguous words: 'The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil' (3:22). Satan is in no way identified as the one responsible for the transgression, and this transgression seems to be nothing in itself other than the acquisition of the knowledge of good and evil, a prerogative of *the Elohim* which they jealously reserved for themselves.

But this Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is not the only one that is forbidden. There is also, in the Garden of Eden, right in the very centre, *the Tree of Life*, and if we understand correctly, one can only access the Tree of Life after having eaten the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. For, in his curse, the Lord God, after lamenting that man had 'stolen' this knowledge of good and evil, declares: 'Let us now prevent him from reaching out his hand, taking from the Tree of Life, eating of it and living forever' (III, 22). First of all, we must acknowledge that this Eternal God has a bad temper, that he is terribly jealous, and that he behaves like a wealthy capitalist who has no intention of sharing his eternity with others. Where would the pleasure be if everyone did as I do?

These verses from Genesis refer to the primitive beliefs of the Hebrews: for them, indeed, the human soul was not immortal, and the sole purpose of religion was to establish a special relationship between man and God in order to enjoy the longest and happiest life possible. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul did not take hold among the Hebrews until quite late, and even then it was a matter of debate: in Jesus' time, only the Pharisees and the Essenes accepted it. Its origin is obviously to be found in Greek philosophy, which itself had been influenced by Eastern thought.

In other words, in the Bible, the problem of evil is simplified to the extreme. On the one hand, the Jews faithful to the covenant made with the Lord God: this is Good; on the other, the Jews who are not faithful to the covenant, but also other peoples: this is Evil. It mattered little to them, then, to know exactly who Satan was or

to discuss its origins. The figure of Satan, whatever name he may be known by, is the result of an Iranian influence, and the legend of Lucifer, the fallen 'Light-Bearer' cast into Darkness, appears only in Christian commentaries. Among the Jews, the metaphysical significance of the Enemy was overshadowed by his pragmatic and utilitarian meaning. Allegorically speaking, to do evil was to follow the Enemy's advice and expose oneself to the vengeance of the Eternal God.

It is true that sociological factors play a significant role in the development of the concept of Satan as the embodiment of absolute evil. For evil is present in everyday life, in many different forms. Poverty, suffering, illness and death can only be seen as clear manifestations of this abstract principle, which increasingly tends to take on a form – a hideous form – in the imagination.

But if we accept that the vast majority of peoples found themselves in a social order governed by evil, it is conceivable that these peoples asked themselves certain questions. They were told that the gods had created the world and created living beings. Yet, despite their passivity, these peoples were nonetheless aware of an injustice: fate was not the same for everyone, and certain privileged few enjoyed life to the full whilst others—the vast majority—laboured and suffered for the exclusive benefit of the former. They had realised that they lived in an evil world, or one dominated by evil masters. Why had the gods, said to be immortal (the first injustice) and all-powerful, decided it should be so? Greek tragedy is an excellent example of this question: how is it that human beings, even when filled with good will, are thus mercilessly crushed by the gods? Moreover, these gods even seem to take pleasure in causing humans to suffer, much like the spectators in the amphitheatre in Rome, when they applaud the condemned as they kill one another or are devoured by lions. Jansenism is not far off,

which claims that God may withhold his grace even from the righteous, and this because God's designs are incomprehensible. So, what is Evil, and why do the gods tolerate the existence of this Evil?

It is well known that positing the principle of an Absolute Good immediately leads to the positing of its opposite: in our logical thinking, the principle of Good cannot be conceived without its counterpart, the principle of Evil. The whole problem lies in determining which of the two is subordinate to the other. Unless, of course, they are two equal principles. Thus is sketched out a doctrine that might be described as dualism and which, over the centuries, would draw its arguments from various mythological traditions and the most diverse religious speculations.

Philosophy has, of course, become involved. Various solutions have been put forward, often interesting, but mostly contradictory, and in any case purely theoretical. Daily religious life requires certainties, not hypotheses, however logical and intellectually satisfying they may be. In some cases, one accepts evil as a necessity and leaves it to the deities—whose aims remain incomprehensible—to resolve the problem: this is the traditional system of the Greeks prior to philosophy. And one is content to note the existence of evil, justifying this existence as a punishment inflicted on human beings as a result of a transgression committed at the dawn of time: the audacity of Prometheus, Pandora's box, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the end of the Golden Age and many other myths are the result.

However, once philosophical reflection comes into play, it is difficult to accept, under any circumstances, the concept of a God who bestows both Good and Evil; this is all the more so as the logical system begins to take shape, a system to which Aristotle, by articulating it precisely, would later give his name: by virtue of the principle of the excluded middle, Good is the antithesis of Evil, and vice versa. One therefore refuses to believe that Evil proceeds from the divine nature, at least directly.

Evil thus becomes a distinct entity, and we end up contrasting the evil powers—which generate Evil—with the good powers that emanate from the true God. Strictly speaking, these are not two parallel and equally omnipotent deities, but two principles whose exact origin is not defined. This is a false dualism insofar as it is assumed that these two principles are created by God, who is unique. But, in practice, one ends up believing in the personalised existence of these two entities, and so one returns to a genuine dualism. The common people make little distinction between an *entity* and a *being*: these are the refinements of philosophers.

There comes a point, however, when explaining the world through dualism is no longer satisfactory: we come back to the same problem, namely the impossibility of believing that a perfect god could have tolerated the existence of imperfection. How can a good God, even indirectly, bring about evil? To reply that he did not intend it would be to acknowledge that this God is therefore not omnipotent, as is claimed. He must therefore be held responsible. We then draw a subtle distinction between apparent Good and real Good, and this leads to the famous saying: 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.' Above all, we reassure ourselves by saying that God, who is perfect, could only have created an imperfect world: otherwise human beings would themselves have been gods, and the one God would no longer have been so. This brings us back to the Hegelian formulation of an absolute God who is equivalent to nothingness because he does not know that he exists. He can only know this because there are *others* facing him. And for him to perceive these others as *such*, they must be *different*. Logically, they cannot be different in the sense of superiority, since God would no longer be an all-powerful, infinite and perfect god. These others must therefore be different in the sense of inferiority. And inferiority implies a lack of means, imperfection. That is what needed to be demonstrated.

This leads us to equate imperfection with Evil. And since these are abstract concepts, as incommunicable as ever, we project them onto an object. In this case, that object is the Devil, the Demon, Satan, Lucifer, or whatever name we give him. He is the prism towards which all the rays of *the black sun* converge. And the world becomes the battlefield where Satan's hordes and God's angelic legions clash. In all this, human beings have no choice but to pick a side. But can they really do so?

This is when the question of free will arises. If man is entirely free, he can indeed choose, as Pelagius has always maintained. But if he is free only in appearance, that choice is imposed on him by a blind fate, as in Greek tragedy. And if man is not free, is he truly responsible? If this responsibility were non-existent, we would fall into absolute determinism, which is another form of fatalism. And this brings us back to the original problem, since one could argue that being compelled to do evil is not evil. But one could put forward another proposition: if certain men are destined – perhaps *predestined* – to do evil, it is because they belong to a vast cohort of
'cursed'. This cohort must have a leader: hence the devil, in his most terrifying form, who thus stands opposed to the God of hosts. We are going round in circles, for we find ourselves back at the central issue of the Bible, where the 'cruel and jealous' God leads his chosen people to conquer the Promised Land, slaughtering everything in their path. Is this evil? Certainly not, since, from the Hebrew perspective, the chosen people must conform to the Lord's secret plan. It is *the others* who are the incarnations of Evil, and Holy War is a good thing, as we have seen both in the sermons of Muhammad and in the various Crusades, including those against the Albigensians. 'Kill them all! God will recognise his own!' This is the admission, by a Roman Catholic prelate, that human beings are not free and must leave the choice to God. But this is contrary

to the official doctrine of the Roman Church, and ultimately closer to Cathar thought. For the Cathars, indeed, free will did not exist. But they introduced a new concept: that of reincarnations necessary to purify oneself through matter and thus return to the source, to the Tree of Life, or to the world of the Essences so dear to Plato. This ultimately denies Evil as an absolute being, since at the end of time, the last soul will have finished purifying itself through matter and will reach the supreme world which it should never have left. Is Catharism a false dualism?

These multiple, interlocking problems demonstrate the complexity of dualism. Moreover, doctrines tinged with dualism contradict one another depending on the era and the opponents attacking them. One can no longer recognise oneself in them.

To try to untangle this complex web, it is best to examine some of the dualistic concepts that have emerged over the centuries in various civilisations. It is worth noting that so-called polytheistic religions – although the issue of polytheism ought, incidentally, to be re-examined in light of the social functions embodied by the so-called gods – have been far less grappling with dualism, owing to the functional dispersion of divinity, than monotheistic religions, the latter continually becoming entangled in contradictions inherent in the unity of divine functions. It is therefore in ancient Persia and in the Judeo-Christian tradition that one must look for the dualists, and, consequently, the ancestors of the Cathars.

II

MAZDEISM

Zoroastrianism is the ancient religion of the Indo-European Persians, dating probably from the third millennium BC until the Hellenistic period. This religion developed in northern Iran, incorporating indigenous beliefs and numerous traditions from the Indus Valley. The name *Zoroastrianism* is a recent one and was coined from Ahura-Mazda, who, according to Persian belief, is the god of light. Moreover, this religion never completely disappeared: it merged with other religions, exerted a lasting influence on nascent Christianity—particularly heretical sects—and persisted locally, as can be seen among the Parsis of Bombay, India, whose name is significant, and who are Mazdeans having undergone a long process of development. It is a doctrine of high spirituality, harmoniously combining archaic rituals characteristic of the early Indo-Europeans, a priestly class analogous to that of the Brahmins, the Flamines and the Druids—the class of the Magi—and an extremely subtle philosophical system, particularly following the reform undertaken by Zarathustra, or Zoroaster. The sacred book of the Mazdeans, equivalent to the Bible or the Indian Rig-Veda, is *the Avesta*, a collection of religious and moral precepts, more or less magical formulas, mythological tales and various prophecies. Let us not forget that the only members of a priestly class to have visited the infant Jesus, according to Christian tradition, are the Magi, who, it is said, came to Bethlehem guided by a star. Whether the story is

Whether true or false matters little to us: this visit by the Magi to the founder of the future Christian religion is a symbolic gesture that speaks volumes about the debt the early Christians owed to the Iranian religion.

The fundamental concept of Zoroastrianism appears as the triumph of dualism. Everything is based, in fact, on the perpetual conflict between two principles: that of Good, represented by the god Ahura-Mazda, or Ormuzd, and that of Evil, represented by the god Ahriman or Angra Mainyu. This is a merciless struggle in which each of the two adversaries successively gains the upper hand, marking out certain periods in universal history, some of which are under the sway of Evil, others under that of Good. In short, life is the result of this opposition between the two principles. But at the end of time, Ahriman will be defeated and return to nothingness, leaving victory to Ahura-Mazda. Thus dualism is only temporary, with everything ultimately resolving into monism.

Presented in this way as a mythological struggle between two gods—a motif found in many other traditions—the Mazdean conception simplifies the problem but does not resolve it entirely, insofar as the existence of Ahriman is justified only by vague postulates. Ahriman, moreover, seems to be a legacy of the ancient religion of the Indo-Europeans prior to their dispersion, and especially before they settled in the Indus Valley, on the Iranian plateau and in northern Europe. Ahriman indeed represents the generic god of *the Aryans*, that is to say, of that core group of peoples whom we now call Indo-Europeans on the basis of their languages—all derived from a common stock—their social structures (the famous tripartite division) and certain technical practices. He is found in some traditions of the Indian subcontinent in the form of Aryaman.

As he is presented, Ahriman is therefore a deity who represents a specific social group, a class of conquerors seeking to preserve their original purity and who hold a position of dominance over the other classes, these other classes

corresponding to subjugated peoples. On further reflection, and looking beyond the racial context, one realises that this is the god of human action, the god of manifestation. He represents relativity in relation to Ahura-Mazda, who symbolises the absolute. In short, Mazdean theology is twofold. From a public, somewhat exoteric perspective, it is conveyed in concrete mythological form: the struggle between the two antagonistic deities justifies the turbulence of the world and the instability of all things. But from a more esoteric perspective, it corresponds to a highly sophisticated ontology: if Ahura-Mazda were alone, not only would the world not exist, but Ahura-Mazda would have no awareness of existing. This is already the Hegelian formulation of the absolute and the relative. Ahriman, who represents first the Aryas, then all creatures, is Ahura-Mazda manifested, and that is why the world exists. But, of course, given the precariousness of existence, the turbulence, injustices and misfortunes of life, Ahriman takes on more 'sinister' elements and becomes responsible for everything that appears as Evil. And as a result, one comes to express a weariness in the face of life's difficulties, a weariness followed by a desire to return to where one came from, to the world of Essences, or of Ideas. Ultimately, this mirrors the Buddhist conception of Being and Non-Being. But note: Being is Ahriman, and Non-Being is Ahura-Mazda in his eternal Nirvana. This conception is the inverse of the Western one. The crux of the matter is whether one wishes to be or not to be. This means that Mazdeism is far more in harmony with Far Eastern thought than with that of the Western world.

This must be borne in mind in order to understand Catharism. For it is quite clear that Ahriman is the figure upon whom the Judeo-Christian Satan is based. But the Cathars did not merely adopt the image; they appropriated the esoteric meaning of Ahriman and made him the creator of matter, the one who scatters the primal energy of the divinity into an illusory world that must be demystified in order to

return to the world of supreme realities, that of the spiritual Light symbolised by Ahura-Mazda.

Under these circumstances, it is not certain that Zoroastrianism is a dualistic religion. It is so in a relative sense, but the supreme god is nonetheless Ahura-Mazda, whose name means 'Lord of Wisdom'. In Mazdean beliefs, this supreme god is surrounded by luminous beings, the *benevolent Immortals*, who are portrayed exactly like the Judeo-Christian archangels and are given characteristic names: Immortality, Perfect Virtue, Benevolent Piety, for example. The symbolic element of this supreme god is Light; therefore, everything that leads to light—fire in the first instance—is classified as belonging to the camp of absolute Good.

On the other hand, Ahriman is portrayed as the imperfect reflection of Ahura-Mazda. He takes on a caricatured form that has certainly left its mark on popular Christian tradition: the Devil, in his grotesque, monstrous, repulsive guise, with his desire to build a counter-world, and with his reputation in folk tales for building bridges *that are always missing something*—be it just a single stone—is indeed the new image of Ahriman. And this image appears to be in line with what the Cathars believed: since the soul is of divine essence and creation, matter and the body are the creations of Satan, but these creations are imperfect and perishable, as the Devil lacks the power to create eternity.

Thus is sketched out, albeit in a remarkably clear manner, the theory known as dualism, which will lie underlying most religions and assume exceptional importance, to the exclusion of all else, in Western Catharism. The Devil is a caricature of God. And Ahriman, too, is surrounded by entities that are not luminous but dark, to whom the names Cruelty, Error and Evil Thought are given. These are, of course, all the devils that will emerge from the medieval unconscious.

All of this leads to a standardisation of lifestyles. A moral code is necessary, because every good deed promotes

Ahura-Mazda's future victory; for every evil deed, by increasing Ahriman's power, delays that victory. The choice is clear: this is precisely why the Perfect Ones of Catharism were so uncompromising. The duties of the Mazdean believer consist of a threefold formula: to have good thoughts, to speak good words, and to perform good deeds. It should be noted that this formulation takes into account three fundamental planes: Thought, which belongs to the realm of the Spirit; Speech, which belongs to the realm of the Soul; and Action, which belongs to the realm of Matter and the Body. This 'Triad', well known in early Christian theology but somewhat forgotten in the official Roman Church, reappears clearly in Cathar doctrine.

There is, therefore, a specific eschatology within Mazdeism. After the final downfall of Ahriman—that is, when Ahriman no longer has a reason for existence (he exists only through the creatures who follow him, that is, in creatures who do not do good or do so imperfectly)—Ahura-Mazda will proceed with the Last Judgement. He will open the Book in which the deeds of each person are recorded. Those who have observed the commandments of *the Avesta*—that is to say, in effect, all of humanity finally reconciled with itself—will be welcomed into the Paradise of Light, the kingdom of Ahura-Mazda. One cannot help but draw parallels with Christian eschatology.

There is, in fact, much more to it. The final defeat of Ahriman and the powers of evil will be foretold by prophets and, above all, by a Messiah, the *Saoshyant*, that is to say, the Saviour. He will come to proclaim that the end is near and that everyone must prepare, through prayer and rites of purification, for the Day of Judgement. There is nothing of the sort in the Hebrew tradition, and those who continue to convince themselves that the New Testament is the continuation of the Old Testament would do well to study *the Avesta* to determine the true origins of Christianity. It is no coincidence that the founder of the Christian religion is Saint Paul, of

Hellenistic Greek culture, and not Saint Peter, the unrepentant Jew, reduced to the rank of a mere symbol of continuity.

As is the case with most ancient religions, Mazdeism involved a number of sacrificial rites, which implies an aristocratic bias: only the wealthy could afford to offer animals as sacrifices. But the prophet and reformer Zoroaster abolished these sacrifices, rightly judging that this cruel custom only served to strengthen the forces of evil. This naturally led to a certain democratisation of the religion, since from then on, rich and poor were on an equal footing when it came to religious practices. Furthermore, Zoroaster reduced these religious practices to their simplest form, and we find this simplification in all religious sects that claim to follow dualism, the Cathars in particular.

It is not entirely clear whether Zoroastrianism had temples. The question remains a matter of debate, but if there were any, they were merely sites on mountains or high ground where, according to Herodotus, the Persians liked to offer sacrifices. It seems that the Mazdeans thought like the Druids: the deity could not be confined within built sanctuaries, and the best way to honour the deity and come into contact with it was to place oneself in the heart of nature, particularly on mountain peaks which, symbolically, linked Heaven to Earth. The same was true among the Celts, where the *nemeton* was either a clearing in the middle of the forest or the summit of a hill, but without any enclosed structure.

There is evidence of the existence of a cult of Fire. Fire was, in fact, the symbol of Ahura-Mazda's radiant glory, and also of the purification through which every creature must pass before regaining the light of the origins. The Greek word for 'fire' is curiously linked to the idea of 'purity'. This fire was lit in the open air, on altars of a most curious design, and these sites are known today as *Atech-gah*, meaning 'places of fire'. Most often, these altars were double, one being slightly higher than

the other, both cubic in shape, with a recess carved into the top surface. Indeed, these twin altars may be seen as an illustration of the fundamental dogma of Zoroastrianism: the existence of two opposing principles in conflict with one another. The Greek writer and geographer Strabo claims to have seen similar monuments in Cappadocia, on which Mages maintained a sacred flame.

It is clear that Zoroaster, who was first and foremost a philosopher, modified early Mazdeism to some extent. We do not know exactly when this pivotal figure in the history of human thought lived: it is likely that his reputation was such that he became a legendary hero, but through this legend we can still discern some traits of the real man he was, probably in the late 7th or early 6th century BCE. This was the era of the historical Buddha in India. It marked the dawn of the brilliant Athenian civilisation. Zoroaster appears to have been overlooked by Herodotus, but Plato mentions him in his **Alcibiades**, and Pythagoras, another semi-legendary figure, is said, according to Saint Clement of Alexandria, to have been among his finest disciples. It is thought that he was born in Media and killed in Bactria, during one of those mass slaughters which are unfortunately all too common in the history of Antiquity; yet legend has it that he was struck dead by lightning—a death, of course, more in keeping with the image we have of this inspired prophet. His name, *Zarathustra*, in the Zend language, could mean 'Golden Star' or 'Shining Star', suggesting that it is in fact a nickname, although the modern etymology is closer to a meaning that would be 'the Man with the Old Camels' in the Avestan language. But Zoroaster is said to have belonged to a noble family named *Spitamas*, which means 'the Whites'. One cannot help but think of the generic name of the Veneti of Vannes, a very ancient people of controversial origin but entirely Celticised, whose name also means 'white', but also 'of pure race'. Be that as it may, this idea of 'whiteness', of 'light', of

‘purity’ is perfectly consistent with both Mazdean doctrine and Cathar beliefs.

It is generally agreed that Zoroaster helped to rid Mazdeism of its more ‘folkloric’ elements and that he sought to intellectualise and spiritualise the ancient myths that had been central to the tradition. Thus, the Sun itself was originally counted among the ‘benevolent immortals’, in other words, it was regarded as an archangel in its own right, in a sense the direct lieutenant of Ahura-Mazda: under Zoroaster’s influence, it became a mere symbol, that of spiritual Light and divine purity to which every human being must aspire. Furthermore, Zoroaster is credited with codifying and organising the ancestral traditions of Mazdeism into a coherent and logical whole. After his death, *the Avesta* was compiled, placed under his patronage, and purporting to record the words of the prophet—words dictated, according to Zoroaster’s own assertion, by the ‘Great Light’. Zoroastrianism, as revised and refined by Zoroaster, thus presents itself almost as a revealed religion, and, in iconography, Ahura-Mazda—initially merely an incommunicable spiritual entity—becomes a more comprehensible anthropomorphic deity, in the form of a figure emerging from a winged solar disc. This representation was undoubtedly influenced by that of Assur, the god of the Chaldeans, and by the cult of the Sun Disc among the Egyptians.

For whilst there were contacts and the mixing of peoples in the ancient East, there was also interaction between different traditions. This is particularly evident in the Mazdean influence on Judaism during the time of Jesus. And although this Zoroastrian Mazdeism developed mainly in Persia after the prophet’s death, with undeniable success, it spread far beyond the Iranian plateau. In fact, we see that it persisted until the Muslim invasions in the 7th century: this means it spanned at least ten centuries, which is considerable. The famous Magi of the Gospel were Zoroastrian priests

. This tradition is symbolic, since part of the doctrine spread throughout the East and had a significant and lasting influence on the religious systems that followed from that point onwards.

The conception of this struggle between Good and Evil, both grandiose and dramatic, is coherent and logical: it could only lead to an acceptance of this belief, albeit one with certain nuances. Moreover, the ultimate victory of the principle of Light emphasised hope, much like the mystery religions that revolutionised early Greek thought and even penetrated Rome immediately prior to the introduction of Christianity, thereby paving the way for its triumph. By separating the evil powers from the good and perfect God, an explanation was provided for a world that otherwise seemed, if not incoherent, at least subject to the sole influence of demons. By positing the victory of Ahura-Mazda over Ahriman as the ultimate goal, meaning was also given to life: the duty of humans was to place themselves at the service of the forces of light to hasten their victory and thus attain eternal happiness.

A few centuries before the Christian era, the East was in a state of stagnation due to the Assyrian expansion. Yet this stagnation harboured a kind of breeding ground: in a more covert manner, particularly in Babylon and Nineveh, various doctrines were interacting with one another. The captivity of the Hebrews in Babylon took place around 600 BC, that is to say at a time when the influence of Zoroaster was beginning to spread. We know that the exile marked a break in the political life of Israel. But this break was accompanied by a whole religious reform. New concepts began to emerge within the Hebrew tradition. The idea of a Messiah who would come to herald the End of Days entered Jewish thought, which, until then, had remained very vague regarding a hypothetical saviour. The figure of the Hebrew Shatam, whose description was previously very vague, began to take shape and to assume the features of the Mazdean Ahriman. Angeology and demonology make their appearance in the sacred texts, in the same time as a

a certain simplification of the extremely complicated and highly formal religious ritual, which came to be imbued with more logical meanings. In short, the Jewish captivity in Babylon, thanks to their contact with other traditions—and particularly with the Mazdean tradition—enabled a refinement of Hebrew thought and, above all, the development of a mysticism that appears to have been entirely absent in earlier times.

But the Mazdean influence was just as potent in south-eastern Europe, particularly amongst the Greeks. This was the period when, in Greece, Dionysus—a god of Thracian origin but already half-Hellenised—began to permeate religious customs and even the collective mindset. The followers of the Dionysian cult, the most prominent of whom were the priests and wanderers of the Orphic sects, travelled throughout the Greek world proclaiming that evil was inherent in man's physical body, and that this body was a prison for the soul—an eternal traveller who had fallen into a trap in this valley of tears that is the visible world. The only way to escape this misery and avoid falling back into the traps of Evil was therefore to prepare for the deliverance of this soul through asceticism and the celebration of *the mysteries*. Orphism springs directly from these teachings, alongside the initiatory legend of Orpheus, himself a native of Thrace, the land from which we shall later see emerge the heretics known as the Bogomils, who were the direct ancestors of the Cathars.

It goes without saying that Greek philosophy did not fail to take Mazdean thought into account. Pythagoras, whether or not he was a disciple of Zoroaster, expressed the same view regarding the body as the 'prison of the soul', and engaged in speculations that echoed those of the Magi. Plato, well aware of what was happening in Persia and northern India, affirmed his belief in the lost soul, which had descended from the realm of the Spirit, from the mysterious yet luminous domain of the Higher Essences, and which aspired only to return to whence it came. This became a widely held view in the Hellenistic world, soon to be dominated by Rome: the universe is ailing, subject to

evil powers; matter is an inferior creation, but the soul, which is of divine essence, belongs to another world that is good. In the shift from the most subtle ontology to a realist philosophy, the primordial conflict between the two constituent principles of the world became a dualist doctrine in the truest sense, one that could enable people of good faith to find meaning in life. But not to discover its explanation. From the intellectual perspectives they once were, Mazdean views, by adapting to the times and human concerns, had become a series of practical guidelines for regeneration through liturgy, asceticism and renunciation—something not found in Zoroaster.

This dualism is found in a religious system which, in late antiquity, enjoyed great popularity and spread throughout Western Europe, mostly propagated by legionaries from the East: the cult of Mithras. In the early days of Christianity, the cult of Mithras was so significant that it came very close to supplanting the Christian faith. There was indeed a certain parallelism between the Gospel doctrine and that of the devotees of Mithras, and the fundamental tenets were almost identical.

Mithra takes his name from the early Indian theogony, that of the Aryans. We know, for example, that archaic Indo-European society revolved around a sacred pair formed by the gods Mithra and Varuna, the latter representing spiritual and magical power, the former temporal, martial and legal power. This corresponds to the ideal image of a social structure, represented in the Celtic world by the druid-king pair, and projected onto the divine world as a sort of archetypal model. The Latin Janus, the two-faced god, but also the god of beginnings, shares certain characteristics with this mythological pair.

But this is not why Mithraism contains dualistic elements. There is never any antagonism or struggle between Mithra and Varuna: they are the two faces of the same reality, and the ideas of Good and Evil have no part in it. Mithra

and Varuna simply employ different means to achieve a single end. Indeed, the Mithra of Asia Minor bears little resemblance to the Indian god: he is much closer to Dionysus or Orpheus, much closer to Ahura-Mazda, and also to Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the cult of Mithra symbolises physical and psychological regeneration through the energy of blood, shed during the ritual sacrifice of the Bull, then through solar energy, which is the supreme visible Light, and finally through the subtle and ineffable divine energy. This regeneration presupposes a fall, a degeneration: beings are indeed prisoners of impure or imperfect matter, and it is the duty of humans to help perfect all that exists. It is therefore a constant struggle of the Sons of Light against the powers of the Shadow, which can restore balance to a troubled world plagued by physical and moral suffering. The believer is called upon to fight by every means against these powers of the Shadow—that is, against Evil—so that truth, spiritual purity, self-sacrifice and the great universal brotherhood of beings and things may triumph.

Mithra thus emerges as a legendary figure who becomes the ultimate model of human action. He is the dispenser of vital energy, the ruler of armies, the guarantor of the purity of the day. He is *Sol Invictus*, that is to say, the Unconquered Sun, he who dies every evening and is reborn every morning. He is the source of all life and also plays the role of demiurge. He is depicted as a hero – who would soon become the solar hero, or hero of civilisation – slaying a bull, symbolising the first living being, whose spilled blood gave rise to plants and animals. Sometimes, Mithra is recognised in a Heraclean form, a human with a lion's face, whose body is encircled by a serpent representing perpetual rebirth. It is said that he was born from a rock on 25 December, the day on which, a few days after the winter solstice, the rebirth of the sun was celebrated. It is immediately clear why Christians, after

After much hesitation, they set Jesus's date of birth as 25 December, in a cave. Mithra is the son of Mother Earth, like all living beings: being of the same nature as them, he can therefore easily lead them in his wake to reclaim the Light. But Mithraism remains virtually silent on the powers that oppose this reconquest: it is understood that these are primarily the forces that imprison human beings in a frenzied selfishness, thereby contributing to their blindness, that is to say, to their separation from the Light. It should be noted that Mithraism, unlike Zoroastrianism, does not pose the problem of dualism on an ontological level, but only on a material and psychological level, which results in the creation of a rather austere moral system. Yet this is indeed a form of dualism that is also resolved by the victory of Light over Darkness.

There is also a variant of Mazdeism that developed in parallel with Mithraism: this is Zervanism, named after the Persian equivalent of the Greek Chronos, the god Zervan. It is possible to view this Zervanism as an evolution of an early form of Mazdeism that may have been unaffected by the influence of Zoroaster. In any case, we are dealing with an attempt to resolve a duality that is not always very clear in Zoroastrian thought, due to the essential superiority of Ahura-Mazda.

In Zervanist conceptions, Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman are equal, at least originally. One is the principle of Good and Light, the other of Evil and Shadow. And these two divine figures are in constant conflict, which explains the turbulence of the world. But Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman are not supreme gods: they are emanations of a higher principle known as Zervan, which means 'Time' in the Zend language, more precisely *Zervan Akanara*, 'Infinite Time'. There are clear parallels between this Persian Zervan and the Greek Chronos: both are gods who create and devour. But the case of Zervan is interesting in that he gives rise to the two principles of Good and Evil. It is therefore he who

encompasses both: Zervan is the god of Good and/or Evil, and everything depends on the choice one makes when addressing him. Dualism is resolved here through a harmonious synthesis of the two opposing principles.

Indeed, in the absolute, that is to say when the supreme god, in this case Zervan, has not yet created, has not yet manifested himself, Good and Evil coexist within him in a sort of nirvana where there is no action but only passive contemplation. But, in relativity—that is, from the moment the world created by Zervan begins to come into action—this action is possible only if the two principles separate and clash, much like electricity exists only when there is a clash between a positive and a negative current: before the clash, electricity existed only in potentiality.

Zervan, before the creation of the world, was certainly a supreme god, since nothing stood in his way, but above all he was a *potential god*. And his potentiality serves no purpose, according to the Hegelian principle. But when potentiality becomes *action*, the two components set themselves in motion and produce the events of History. These two components are, of course, Good and Evil, for they are the most antagonistic forces imaginable. Yet the world exists only through this perpetual struggle between the two principles. We see that the dualism of Zervanism is resolved by dialectical reasoning of the finest order. In fact, it is not even a dualism, since the forces of Good and Evil are, in themselves, nothing but manifestations of a single Totality. Had the followers of Zervan considered the ontological conclusions to which their system led?

Zervanism spread throughout part of the Hellenistic world. Plutarch, who alludes to Mazdeism, presents it in its Zervanist form. This doctrine also had a profound influence on Mithraism, and beyond that on the other religions that followed, including Christianity. It is at the origin of what would later be called *mitigated dualism*,

in which the two principles of Good and Evil do not exist in their own right, since they are not independent, both deriving from a single, prior sovereign principle. But from the perspective of all those who have professed moderate dualism, the sensible world, matter and corporeal beings are always the work of the principle of Evil, in other words, of Satan. This is what we find in Catharism. But it must be acknowledged that the Zervanian doctrine was a highly skilful compromise between monism and dualism proper, and ultimately the recognition of an absolute monism that gives rise to a relative dualism.

III

MANICHEISM

The early days of Christianity were marked by a remarkable proliferation of sects of every kind, origin and belief. This was primarily because it was a time when, throughout the Mediterranean world, traditional values were crumbling and people were beginning to feel a profound metaphysical anxiety. The official religion of Rome was now nothing more than a series of political rituals, and no one believed any longer in the gods of Olympus, whom Prometheus had helped to undermine through an excess of rationalism. Greek religion had merged with the mystery religions developing on both sides of the Aegean Sea. Mithraism was reaching the banks of the Rhine, carried in the baggage of the legions. Druidism took refuge in the forests, away from the great Roman roads where a certain persecution was beginning to take hold. Dionysus invaded the streets of Rome through the Bacchanalia. In this incredible melting pot of peoples and ideas, no one could make head nor tail of it all.

It was then that the Christian message began to spread. It struggled to take root in people's minds, and it must be said that, in the very beginning, Christianity was merely a small sect amongst many others, scarcely larger than itself and certainly smaller than the followers of Isis and Osiris. Moreover, it would be foolish to present early Christianity as an organised, religion and holding a doctrine.

Christianity, in the first century AD, was above all the very limited dissemination of a message. And this message was received very differently depending on the circumstances, social class, location and local customs. Dogma was far from being established. Rituals were very vague, and there was no structure: only local churches, gathered around a missionary—not necessarily a disciple of Jesus—or an 'elder', otherwise known as a 'priest' (the Greek word *presbutos* means "ancient, old"), were taking shape here and there, but particularly in Asia Minor. The Jews had been scattered across a "diaspora" that was not about to end any time soon, and the authorities tended to regard Christians as dissident Jews. Moreover, the distinction between Judaism and Christianity was not yet very clear, and apostles such as Saint Paul vigorously opposed this notion of Jewishness that Saint Peter continued to emphasise, even claiming that one could not become a Christian unless one was first a Jew. All this represents a state of confusion such as humanity has never before experienced.

This means that the Christian message will be interpreted very differently by different people. It means that, within what is beginning to be called the Christian community, a considerable number of sects will spring up, and that these sects, as they organise themselves, will become distinct groups, sometimes with no direct links to other groups. The first consequence is geographical dispersion. But the second consequence, which is no less significant, is that the message will be interpreted, twisted and ultimately altered in widely divergent ways. And this would continue for several centuries, during which, following the official recognition of the Christian religion by Constantine, and then after the Edict of Milan which made it the religion of the Empire, those who were not in harmony with Rome would begin to be treated as deviants and *heretics*. We are not yet at the stage of the Inquisition, but the seeds of repression are already appearing. They will find fertile ground for their development.

Among these various schools of thought, all of which drew on ancient concepts from so-called pagan religions or borrowed openly from philosophy, the Gnostics were to carve out a considerable share.

What is today known as *Gnosticism*, from the Greek word *gnosis* meaning 'knowledge', is the result of a sometimes turbulent convergence between three key traditions: Christianity, of course, Zoroastrian Mazdeism, and Greek philosophy of Platonic or Neoplatonic origin. This Gnosticism does not constitute a religion in itself, let alone a monolithic bloc: between sixty and eighty schools claiming to belong to this school of thought have been identified. Admittedly, there were differences between these schools regarding methods and points of detail, but all were linked by a body of ideas that make it a perfectly distinct system.

The emerging trend was a refusal to attribute to God the creation of the material world, which is the primary cause of the existence of evil. The Gnostics were therefore Christians who drew upon the teachings of the Greek philosophers and who, because God can only be perfect, excluded evil from divine creation. Between the immaterial world—the abode and kingdom of the good God, which thus resembled Plato's world of archetypes—and the material, sensible world, the imperfect work of Satan, they posited the existence of one or more worlds. This intermediate world was populated by demigods, whom they called the *Aeons*: these were beings who possessed both divine and human nature. *Now*, *Jesus was one of these eons*, which, of course, constitutes a *heretical* assertion: but at the time, there was fierce debate over whether Jesus was a human elevated to the rank of the gods, or whether he was a god incarnate, and the official answer had not yet been given.

The Gnostics' position was, above all, one of synthesis: they refused to draw a line between the Gospel message and the humanist thought of the Greek philosophers, and

claimed there was continuity in the evolution of the human spirit. They displayed great mistrust towards the biblical books of the Old Testament, rejecting all or part of them. In terms of lived religion, a wide variety of practices could be observed. Some sects advocated the most rigorous asceticism to achieve a total purification of the being. Others, on the contrary, basing themselves on the assertion that the flesh is a satanic creation, sought in a sense *to burn* it away by pushing its possibilities to the limit towards total annihilation. This latter conception gave rise to a whole series of practices of a more or less magical and sexual nature, leading to debauchery that was most condemned by contemporary observers who did not understand its exact meaning. Indeed, this category of Gnostics went very far in this regard, but the apparent depravity concealed deep motivations and was justified by them.

In any case, it was a revolution that set thought free from history as it had hitherto been conceived, from the Old Testament—perceived as the exclusive heritage of the Jewish people and, as such, suspect of misappropriation or alteration—and, finally, from the cold Greek cosmology that claimed to explain the world scientifically. This form of thought, so varied in its manifestations, spread throughout the Near East and largely dominated Alexandria, which was its true capital, as well as Babylon and most of the major cities. The Gnostic communities brought together scholars and intellectuals who represented the intellectual elite of the time. Hence the blend of magic, philosophy and symbolic mythology found in all doctrines claiming to be Gnostic.

Gnostic tendencies soon found their way into other schools of thought, affecting both the Neoplatonists and the Pythagoreans, who did not belong to the Christian world. But the Christian churches were not immune to their influence, and thus groups developed which can be

To name but one example of those classified as heretics, there were the Novatians of North Africa, who demanded of their priests absolute purity and complete detachment from earthly ties, going so far as to advocate an impossible disembodiment. The theologians of the time, those who would come to be known as the 'Church Fathers', began to react vigorously, and soon dualism was regarded not merely as one heresy among others, but as *the* major and unforgivable *heresy*.

It is a variant of Gnosticism, *Manichaeism*, which constituted the most perfect example of dualist heresy, whilst becoming a true religion with its own specific rites and dogmas. The name became famous, and eventually came to denote anything arising from a fundamental opposition between two principles: it is not uncommon, for example, to hear it said of a crime film or a classic Western that the themes evoked in the work, although having no connection with religion or metaphysics and concerning only the struggle of a big-hearted vigilante against a horrible outlaw, are Manichaean. Ultimately, the term comes to describe anything that is clear-cut, anything that is divided, even in a very basic way, into two apparently distinct categories.

The terms 'Manicheans' and 'Manichaeism' derive from the name of an Iranian, Mani, or Manès, who was born in 217 AD in a village in central Babylonia. He was the son of a man named Patek, and his mother's name was Maryam. Both were of Persian origin and, in all likelihood, belonged to a noble family, the Arsacids, the dynasty then ruling in Iran. We know that his father, who officially professed the Mazdean religion, was, as they say, 'on a spiritual quest'. He had joined a Gnostic sect. Mani was therefore raised in an environment concerned with spirituality, and in any case under Gnostic influence.

The story of Mani is rather confused, as legendary traditions have become intertwined with the authentic elements of his life. At the age of twelve, he is said to have received a divine message. He is said to have had a vision of an angel sent by the ' ' 'King of the Paradise of the

‘Lights’, who is said to have spoken these words to him: ‘Leave these men (of the Gnostic sect). You do not belong to them. You are destined to reform morals, but you are too young and the time has not yet come.’ Twelve years later, the angel is said to have entrusted him with a second message: ‘The time has now come. Make yourself known and proclaim your doctrine loud and clear.’ This implies that during those twelve years, he had immersed himself in religious or theological studies. He then undertook a journey to India, and, on his return, went to the court of Shapur, of the Sassanid dynasty, which had just replaced the Arsacid dynasty on the throne of Persia. It seems that Mani was very well received at this court, which included many scholars, for he gained followers among the king’s entourage and was granted permission to preach his doctrine as he saw fit and wherever he wished. It is even said that he converted King Shapur, and legend adds that Mani took the king up to heaven, and that the two of them remained suspended in the air for some time.

In any case, between 242 and 273, Mani travelled throughout the Persian Empire, which was still steeped in the ancient Mazdean religion, and appears to have attracted an ever-growing number of followers. But Shapur died in 273: Mani lost his key supporter. Admittedly, Shapur’s son, Ormuzd, continued to offer his protection to the prophet, but he reigned for only a year and was succeeded by his brother Bahram, who remained entirely devoted to the Mazdean religion and would not tolerate a different religion being preached in his kingdom. The magi, who naturally detested Mani, took advantage of this to have him condemned. Imprisoned and chained to the walls of his cell, Mani died in 277. After his death, his disciples continued his preaching and spread it throughout the Middle East. They succeeded in establishing a sort of highly structured Church that withstood the attacks of all its adversaries—both Zoroastrians and Orthodox Christians—for a long time.

However, this was not Christianity. Mani’s aim was to found a universal religion by attempting to

to find the common denominator of all the major existing religions. We are very familiar with his doctrine thanks to documents of the utmost importance that have been discovered in Chinese Turkestan and Egypt. Mani declares himself the successor of the Buddha, Zoroaster and Jesus. Whilst these three were prophets who spoke to their respective peoples, Mani speaks to all the peoples of the earth. He also claims that the Buddha, Zoroaster and Jesus brought only a partial teaching: each of them held a part of the truth and knowledge, but it is he, Mani, who holds the complete knowledge, because he is the final link in a long chain, the ultimate messenger of God. And to ensure this knowledge is disseminated, Mani, unlike other prophets who were content to speak only to their disciples, insists on writing down himself what God has taught him.

However, Manichaeism is not merely a harmonious synthesis of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity: it is also a *form of gnosis*, since everything rests upon Knowledge. One cannot attain salvation without knowledge. One must not 'die a fool'. This is the key phrase of this doctrine, whose claims are therefore highly intellectual. Moreover, the only real problem—but also the most difficult to resolve—is that of the amalgamation of a divine fragment, in other words the soul, with a body that is a product of the earthly world, itself the work of the Devil and the initial cause of the existence of Evil. This reintroduces the notion of absolute dualism.

Indeed, Mani's doctrine posits the existence of two uncreated, eternal and equivalent principles: Good and Evil, the simplest representations of which are Light and Darkness. But behind this lies a much more direct formulation: God is Good, Matter is Evil.

This is where the difficulties begin. On the surface, everything seems simple. Yet, if we refer to Saint Augustine, who was a Manichaean for a long time before of he converted and to fight the

Manichaeism is a little different. In his **Contra Faustum**, he imagines a dialogue between himself and the Manichaean Faustus of Milae. And in this dialogue, Faustus maintains that in Mani's doctrine there is only one god: 'It is true that we recognise two principles, but there is only one which we call God; we call *the* other *hyle* or matter, or, as is more commonly said, the Devil. Now, if you claim that this establishes that there are two gods, you also claim that a doctor who deals with health and sickness establishes that there are two 'healths '; or that a philosopher who discusses good and evil, abundance and poverty, maintains that there are two 'goods' and two 'abundances'.

The argument is convoluted, but it boils down to the assertion that the Manicheans, whilst acknowledging the existence of two uncreated principles, believe in the existence of a single God. It is all a matter of terminology, and this terminology was not always well received by the opponents of Manichaeism, as would later be the case with the Inquisitors and the theologians who opposed the Cathars.

In fact, the existence of a single God is not incompatible with the existence of two uncreated principles. Evil, which is the Devil and which is matter, is in fact an affirmation opposed to Good: it is a kind of Non-Being opposed to Being. These two principles are found within the single God, but they are merely principles and not deities. Moreover, Evil is merely the negation of Good, or rather—as will reappear in Catharism—*Evil is the absence of Good*. The difficulty lies in understanding why Good can sometimes be absent. But there is nothing in this formulation that would shock an orthodox Christian, long accustomed to hearing of the torments of Hell—that is, absolute Evil—which are the eternal deprivation of God, that is to say, of absolute Good. The danger is that one can take this line of thought very far and claim, with some justification if one follows Manichaean logic, that God can voluntarily withdraw and, through his absence, bring about evil. This is essentially the

St Augustine's own position, a position that was subsequently taken to extremes by Calvin and Jansenius.

Of course, this Manichaean doctrine could not be conveyed in this way: only philosophers would have been able to make sense of it. It had to be disseminated in the form of vivid narratives, and the myth had to be given a form capable of being grasped by the average mind. Manichaeism is thus expressed through elements of a mythological nature. As Good and Evil are two opposing principles, they cannot coexist and are therefore situated in separate realms. Thus, Good is situated in the north, or above, whilst Evil is in the south, below. This merely borrows from tradition the traditional image of the heavenly Paradise and the subterranean Hell.

But this location, however symbolic it may be, takes on a strange meaning that Mani certainly did not foresee when it is appropriated by ideologues driven by aims other than disinterested theology. Mani and his disciples assert, in fact, that it is in the north, above, that the 'Father of Greatness', the 'King of the Paradise of Lights', resides. As for the
'Prince of Darkness', he is in the south, down below. Twentieth-century exegetes, inspired by racist theories and dazzled by Norse mythology—with all its connotations of whiteness and purity—have not hesitated to exploit these Manichaean themes, particularly in relation to the Cathars and the Quest for the Holy Grail. Are the 'Nordics' who flocked – and still flock – to the upper Ariège valley, to Montségur and to the Razès Manichaeans?

Symbols are dangerous insofar as they can be interpreted according to questionable criteria that prove nothing. From a strictly mythological perspective, Manichaean doctrine aims at nothing other than to embody, through spatial imagery, the separation of opposites. The North is spellbinding because it is mysterious: why not place the 'Supreme Kingdom' there? It all depends on the socio-cultural context. Thus, the Celts, who always oriented themselves towards the rising sun, regarded the north as a sinister region, since it was at

left, but that did not prevent them from claiming that Druidism and supreme knowledge originated from the 'northern islands of the world'. It is a common trope to situate the seat of Higher Knowledge in the north. And, of course, for the 'Nordics' in question, the South can only be the realm of Satan, that of the Semites and Black people. Up there, in the mysterious 'Kingdom of Thule', God, whoever he may be, awaits us; and he is surrounded by a cohort *of eons* that revolve under the command of the *archons*. We see the outlines of a militia taking shape, one that is in no way celestial, but which borrows its 'order' from this pure and perfect organisation. Down below, in the sultry heat of the south, the demons swarm around the Prince of Darkness in a disorderly – there can be no order, since Evil is the negation of what happens above – and perpetual movement, in the course of which they kill one another and are constantly reborn. The myth itself is entirely coherent.

But all this leads to a cosmogony. Amidst this tumultuous upheaval, and at a moment that marks the dawn of Time, the Prince of Darkness suddenly glimpses the world of Light. Perhaps he himself comes from this world of Light and retains a certain nostalgia for it, like the Satan described by Victor Hugo, one of the poets who was undoubtedly the greatest Manichean of all? This vision gives rise within him to a desire to conquer this unknown or forgotten world, which, in any case, is marvellous and cannot fail to arouse covetousness. The Prince of Darkness will therefore launch his demonic troops in an assault on the kingdom of Light.

The Father of Greatness is taken by surprise by this attack. To defend himself, he emanates a first form, the 'Mother of Life', who in turn emanates the 'First Man', who is the Ahura-Mazda of the Mazdeans. This original man has as his allies the five elements: Air, Fire, Light, Water and Wind. Ahura-Mazda desperately attempts to repel the demons' attack, but he is defeated and swallowed up, along with the five elements, into the Darkness below. Thus, a fragment

of the divine nature is imprisoned within Matter. One will note striking parallels between this Manichaean myth and Germanic-Scandinavian mythology, particularly regarding the threat posed by the Giants, who are ever ready to launch an attack on the fortress of Asgard, where the Gods dwell, and also in relation to the great eschatological battle, *Ragnarök*, or the Twilight of the Gods.

However, all is not lost. The primordial Man then addresses a prayer to God, which he repeats seven times, a number symbolising a cyclical duration. This prayer implores the Supreme Being to deliver him. Then the 'King of the Paradise of Lights' brings forth several creations, the last of which, the 'Living Spirit', descends in the company of the 'Mother of Life'. Here we recognise the influence of Christianity: the Supreme Being sends, as it were, the 'Holy Spirit' accompanied by the Virgin Mary. Then the Living Spirit reaches out his hand to the Primordial Man to draw him out of the world of Darkness. Thus is explained and justified the famous 'handshake' of the Manicheans, symbolically marking their status as the chosen ones.

The primordial Man is thus set free. He has ascended to the realm above. But he had to leave behind the five elements in the realm below—that is to say, in a sense, his *soul*. This substance, which flows from the Good and is luminous in itself, is tainted by its contact with Matter. We must therefore organise the world with a view to one day recovering this
tainted 'soul', purify it and raise it back up to the realm of Light.

The Supreme Being will therefore divide the matter that is mixed with divine substance. The part that is not defiled by Darkness will produce the Sun and the Moon. This, moreover, explains the special worship that the Manicheans paid to the Sun and the Moon, these two celestial bodies being regarded as sharing in the divine nature. Another part, which is tainted, though not entirely, will give rise to the stars. Then, a third part, entirely contaminated by Evil, will serve to form plants and animals. Finally,

To punish the demons for their attack and their injustice, their skin, flesh, bones and excrement will form the earth, the mountains and the waters.

The demons are thus threatened with losing all trace of luminous substance forever, and not wishing to sink into eternal darkness after having beheld the kingdom of Light, they concentrate all that remains of luminous energy within them into two new beings they create: Adam and Eve. Thus is the birth of humanity explained: humans are a remnant of divine energy gathered and concentrated by the demons. But the human soul, that divine spark which remains forever, is so thoroughly enslaved to matter that it is no longer aware of its divine origin. Its natural state is to be eternally ignorant. It is deprived of knowledge. Yet the hope of salvation persists: a possibility of deliverance will be offered to humanity. Knowledge will be bestowed upon it by the emissaries of the Supreme Being, that is to say, the Prophets, the most important of whom are Ahura-Mazda and the transcendent Jesus of the Manicheans, whom they call 'Jesus the Luminous'. And, at the end of time, we shall witness the definitive victory of the God of Light over the world of Matter, which will be destroyed in a gigantic conflagration. Here we can see another analogy with the Germanic-Scandinavian tradition.

Mani's vision lacks neither power nor grandeur. It is a mythology that seeks to offer a rational explanation for the existence of the visible world and the presence of Evil. To achieve this, Mani did not invent everything from scratch: whatever the truth of his 'vision' may be, he drew heavily on a traditional body of knowledge that was within his reach—a mythological body of knowledge, of course—to which he added Mazdean structures. This traditional body of knowledge was obviously not found among the Germanic peoples, despite the striking analogies that can be observed; that is not where he sought it. It is more likely that he found it in Iran itself, and in the immediate surrounding area, within the sphere of influence of the Scythians. Since the work of Georges Dumézil, we have been aware of the close links that exist between the mythological narratives of the

the Scythian peoples and those of the Germanic and Celtic peoples. And when one analyses Manichaean cosmogony in detail, one is led to some curious comparisons, particularly regarding the legend of the Grail, especially the version recounted by the German Wolfram von Eschenbach. There is a German-Iranian vision of the Grail. In fact, it is Manichaean: and certain Germans who sought the Grail at Montségur or in Cathar country did not do so without reason.

For it is clear that the Cathars are the heirs of the Manicheans. This also means that Catharism appears far more as a *distinct religion* than as a Christian heresy. What, then, has Christian theology to do with it? Recognising Jesus as one of the messengers of the God of Light does not exactly fit with the notion of the one and only Son of God who comes, through his sacrifice, to save humanity. And what is striking about Manichaeism is the tendency towards this profound detachment from matter, since it is Evil, sometimes going to great lengths, towards the worst aberrations. Asceticism can be taken to extremes, since the ideal would be to destroy as soon as possible the physical body that imprisons us: this leads straight to suicide. But Mani never encouraged suicide, nor did the Cathars. However, an ambiguity remains: this tendency is constantly evident throughout the history of Manichaean sects and finds its culmination in the famous *Endura* of the Cathars from the late 13th century.

Eastern elements are not absent either. If the believer manages to free themselves from the grip of the external material world and to observe moral principles, their soul, after death, will make a triumphant ascent and enter the Kingdom of Light, which is a true *Nirvana*. This salvation is achieved primarily through a kind of inner enlightenment, enabling us to recognise our dual nature. The Buddhist influence is evident here, but unlike Eastern doctrine, which emphasises pure, sensory enlightenment leading to renunciation, Manichaean doctrine views enlightenment

from a more intellectual perspective: it is a form of knowledge, a *gnosis*. Essentially, Mani is linked to the Gnostic tradition.

Manichean morality, which aims to help beings rediscover their original purity, thus becomes a morality of non-action, which is not without its ambiguities either. The external world is therefore the work of the Devil, and all actions undertaken to shape this world, in whatever form, serve to encourage the God of Evil. Let us take this further: any material improvement, any progress of civilisation, any scientific discovery, any new technology—all of this contributes to increasing the power of this God of Evil and perpetuating his work. Under these conditions, a strict application of Manichaean morality would lead to a refusal to live, to the extinction of the species. It does not, however, appear that the Manichaeans went so far as to advocate such extreme solutions.

Moreover, they drew distinctions among their followers. On the one hand, there were the 'Pure Ones', the 'Elect', and on the other, the
'Listeners', or ordinary believers. The former are bound by a rigorous, uncompromising asceticism; but the latter live in the world, like everyone else, marrying, working and participating in the life of the social group to which they belong. Their specific duty was to provide for everything necessary for the sustenance of the Chosen Ones. Thus the Elect had no opportunity to sin. This may seem shocking, and there is a certain tendency here towards the exploitation of others. But all religions have practised this system to a greater or lesser extent: 'Work, labour, feed us, for in this way we may pray for you.' " Buddhist monks and mendicant friars do nothing else. Moreover, ordinary Manichaean believers seem to have accepted this hierarchical system very well. And we find it in its entirety in Catharism: only the Perfect Ones are bound by the most rigorous asceticism, and it is the Believers, living in the world as normal, who provide for their sustenance.

Of course, only the Pure could hope, after their death, to enter the Kingdom of Light. But the others retained hope, for, according to Mani's doctrine, believers were reincarnated after death, and this continued until they themselves became Pure in a future life. On the other hand, if they had led a life entirely devoted to Matter, they risked being reborn as an animal. All this is found in Catharism.

The Manichaean cult, like the Mazdean cult from which it originated, was reduced to its simplest form. The Manichaean religion does not appear to have made use of sacraments in the sense understood by the Christian religion. The only rite comparable to a sacrament is that of the laying on of hands, which was performed when the Believer entered the category of the Elect. Through this gesture, analogous to that of Christian Confirmation, the Believer received the Spirit. We recognise here, of course, the Cathars' *consolamentum*.

For the rest, worship consisted of hymns, prayers and sermons, intended both to strengthen the faith of believers and to convert non-believers, as well as fasts that were sometimes very strict, lasting up to a month. There were also public confessions: believers to the Elect, and the Elect amongst themselves, as well as a general confession by the community on the occasion of the Feast of the *Bêma*. The name of this festival means 'pulpit', and it was an allusion to the symbolic pulpit from which Mani had preached his teachings. The ceremony was therefore held before a high platform, where the prophet was believed to be present. Another ceremony took place, accompanied by hymns and prayers, during the commemoration of Mani's passion and his ascension to the Kingdom of Light.

The question of Manichaean temples remains controversial. No authentic temples of the Manichaean religion have been found. According to the testimony of Saint Augustine, who was better placed than anyone to speak on the matter, the Manichaeans had meeting places as well as temples. He therefore draws a distinction between the two. It is assumed that the temples

Manichaean temples were very simple in construction and devoid of any ornamentation. The idea that seems to have prevailed is that of austerity, through which one can achieve direct contact with the spirit of Light. It is therefore reasonable to assume that these temples were primarily sites – akin to Druidic sanctuaries in the heart of nature – chosen according to certain criteria that remain a mystery, but which are linked to light, and thus to the sun. This is why people have spoken of
'solar temples', and to claim that Montségur was once, if not a temple, at least a solar *site*: we know that the orientation of the fortress, towards the east, points, beyond the Pech de Bugarach, to the average sunrise position throughout the year.

In Manichaean mythology, the Sun represents what remains of the spiritual substance that was not tainted by evil when Ahura-Mazda was imprisoned within matter. Furthermore, as in Mithraism, the Sun remains the most perfect symbol of spiritual Light, just as the Cross is for Christians. Let us not forget that the Cross, which we find in Occitania as a legacy of the Gallic people of the Volques Tectosages, is a very ancient symbol of solar origin, like the *swastika* and the Celtic *triskelion*. Among the Manicheans, prayers were always recited facing the sun, and one can understand why there is such a strong desire to link the Cathar cult and the 'cult' of the Grail (described by Chrétien de Troyes as a vessel from which a marvellous light emanates) to an ancient cult of the Sun, the latter being regarded both as a symbol of spiritual Light and as a visible manifestation of the Divinity.

Manichaeism thus appears as a doctrine of profound spirituality, an attempt to provide a coherent explanation for a world plagued by contradictions and evil. It can be said that it is a religion in its own right, a distinct religion. But, curiously, Manichaeism has, at various times, provoked the most ferocious repression. Diocletian, in 297, gave the signal for the fight against

the Manicheans, who were beginning to spread throughout Italy, Gaul and Spain. In 389, Theodosius had them sentenced to death.

Manichaeism, as an established religion, was not long to disappear. The Orthodox Christians had dealt it its final blows. But a religion never truly disappears. Ideas take refuge in the shadows and sometimes reappear in different guises. And as the problem of the existence of Evil remains ever relevant, sooner or later Manichaean solutions resurface.

Montségur

Quéribus

Peyrepertus

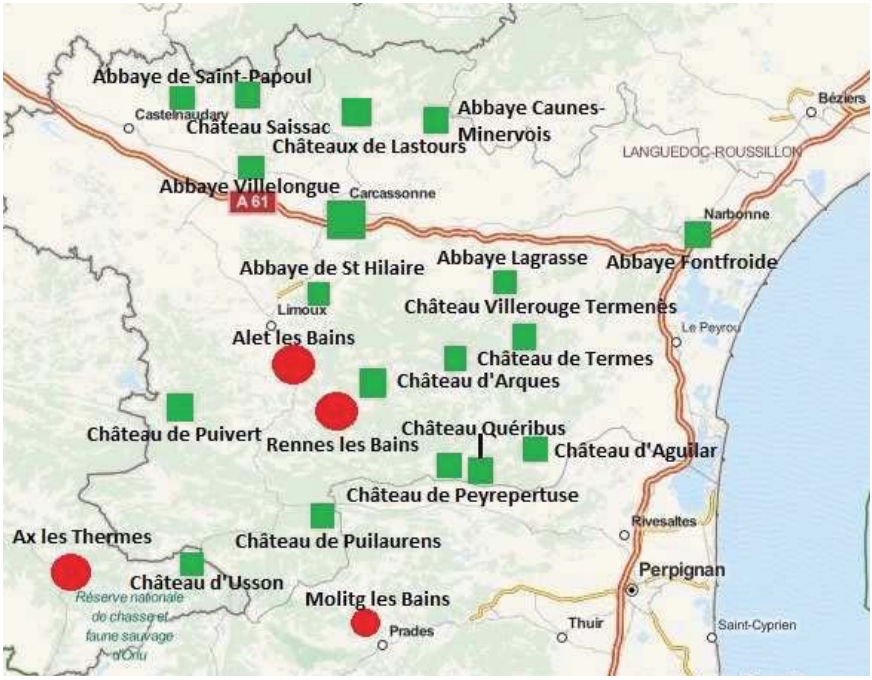
A pillar from the church in Rennes-le-Château, where Abbé Saunière discovered the famous coded parchments in 1891!…

The Magdala Tower in Rennes-le-Château

Puilaurens

Termes

Puivert



Map of Cathar country

IV

THE BOGOMILS

During the period known as either Late Antiquity or the Early Middle Ages, a wide variety of sects emerged throughout the Christian world and in neighbouring regions. The enduring dualist theory often manifested itself through these sects, alongside dogmas inherited from every conceivable tradition. The so-called barbarian invasions and the mixing of populations fostered this kind of syncretic system: in the midst of a world in the throes of instability and upheaval, it was very difficult to refer to established values, to universally recognised values. And yet, people sought these values desperately, attempting to discover the answers to the anxious questions the world was asking itself.

The Christian Church clearly appears to be best placed to uphold this universality of values. But the Church, too, is searching for its identity. The dogma it professes remains rather fragile; moreover, it is the result of a series of compromises reached between the great theologians of the time, each of whom had their own way of seeing things and interpreting the Gospel message. It is not easy to make sense of it all. It is only in the face of those we call heretics that the Church finds a certain cohesion, firstly to combat a tangible danger (the Church is perhaps beginning to take on a temporal character and self-interest comes into play), and secondly to clarify a doctrine that feels confused and lacking a firm foundation.

But the Church has many opponents, mainly from within the Church itself, which they often accuse of spiritual and moral corruption. The opponents of the institutional Church, as is to be expected, claim to be reformers and the custodians of the truth. And it is to prove that they hold the truth that they express their views by basing them on everything they can find in the sacred texts, in philosophical systems, and in treatises on morality. Thus appeared a certain Priscillian, who died in 385. He was a devout Spaniard who preached an ascetic monastic life modelled on the eremitism that had come from the East and was beginning to spread. Priscillian had his own interpretation, and he formed his own synthesis by incorporating into his Christian dogma concerns that seemed to belong to paganism, particularly ancient Druidism. However, unlike the Celts, he believed in the presence in the world of two opposing principles, good and evil, and his doctrine, which attracted followers for a time, ultimately proved to be dualistic.

Around 660, an Armenian named Constantine founded, in a country beset by various cultural and religious conflicts, a new sect distinguished by the particular veneration it showed for the Apostle Paul. These were the Paulicians, who, for nearly a century, formed a group of fierce warriors against whom Byzantium had to fight alongside its battles against the Arabs. Towards the end of the 8th century, their highly active missionaries reached Bulgaria, and until the 12th century, this sect remained highly influential in the Balkans.

Little is known about the Paulician doctrine because they avoided revealing it to outsiders and even went so far as to outwardly conform to the rites and regulations of the Christian Church in order to maintain a façade and avoid repercussions. But this doctrine, as we know, is based on the belief in two opposing principles. For the Paulicians, ‘ ’ is ‘ ’ the ‘ ’ Demiurge, ‘ ’ that is to say ‘ ’ the ‘ ’ Prince of

Darkness, who created the world and living beings. They utterly rejected the Old Testament and regarded the Eucharist as a meaningless gesture. For them, the Cross, whether as the instrument of Jesus's torture or a solar symbol, held no particular significance. Nevertheless, they sought to draw closer to Christianity, if only for the
'to infiltrate', and also to find arguments in the Scriptures to support their doctrines. It was a convenient way of proselytising without alienating themselves too much, and above all of building up a force that was all the more effective for operating in the shadows. In this way, by the early 8th century the Paulicians were numerous enough to influence the politics of the kingdoms in which they lived. Along the upper reaches of the Euphrates, they had even founded a colony which held out for a long time by force of arms, within a country that was already Muslim. Defeated in 878 by the Byzantines, many of them found themselves serving as soldiers in the imperial armies, whilst others were deported to the Balkans. It was there that the Paulicians would find fertile ground for the spread of their dualist doctrine.

The Slavs had begun to settle in the Balkan Peninsula from the 6th century onwards, establishing scattered and ununited settlements there. It was the Bulgarians who later brought cohesion to the various Slavic settlements and gave their name to the country thus created, south of the Danube. In the mid-9th century, Christian missionaries sent by Rome began to evangelise Bulgaria, which, until then, had remained in a state of Slavic neo-paganism. However, for obviously political reasons, the Patriarch of Byzantium, displeased to see that Rome was taking an interest in regions he considered to fall under his authority, sent his own missionaries. There was therefore a marked rivalry between Christians of the Roman rite and those of the Greek rite (the schism had not yet occurred), and sects with Manichaean tendencies took advantage of the situation, the Paulicians foremost among them. In this new blending of traditions, and given

Given the diverse influences emanating from Byzantium, which served as a more or less open refuge for all the heretics of the time, a new sect emerged: the *Bogomils*.

During the second quarter of the 10th century, in Bulgaria, in a mountainous and inaccessible district of Macedonia, a village priest named Bogomil began to preach to the minor nobility, the lower clergy and the peasants. He did not advocate rebellion against the great nobles or the high clergy, but rather resignation and a quest for serenity through a monastic life, the only means of finding consolation in this troubled world beset by the forces of evil. It was this first precept that the disciples of this priest, known as the Bogomils after their master, would strive to apply: accounts agree in stating that the Bogomils, in the early days, were ascetics and hermits clad in simple garments, preaching humility and gentleness, and devoting themselves to frequent prayers and long meditations. They rejected the pomp of the Church and all its sacraments, which they deemed useless and mere formalities, as well as all ostentatious acts of worship. Above all, they were fiercely iconoclastic, a stance that was not, incidentally, unwelcome to everyone in Byzantium at that time. On a more worldly level, Bogomil and his followers denounced the power and wealth of established states, which, to them, were nothing but vanity and nothingness. What is true, what is modest, what is humble, is Christ—but a Christ who is more symbolic than real—and this Christ can expect nothing from this earth but injustice, persecution and tears.

The Bogomils' doctrine seems somewhat confused to us because we know of it only through their enemies, and these do not always agree on the points they seek to refute. It may nevertheless be argued that there were two tendencies among them: one strictly dualist, the other a moderate form of dualism.

In the first tendency, Matter was the work of the Devil and the Spirit the work of God. It was therefore necessary to reject everything

that pertained to matter, practise rigorous asceticism, abstain from all sexual relations, refrain from drinking wine and eating meat, and lead a life of deprivation and renunciation. As for the Cross, they rejected it because it symbolised nothing but cruelty. The Bogomil community of this tendency refused any organisation that was earthly, and therefore evil, and recognised no hierarchy. This radical stance led to total marginalisation, even intense persecution, but this had to be endured with resignation in imitation of Christ, recognised as a model and an example.

The second trend reveals a more complex line of thought. Originally, there existed a spiritual world over which God reigned. The Trinity existed within him, the Son and the Holy Spirit being merely modes of the Father; this constituted a rejection of official dogma and led to the Bogomils of Bulgaria being called 'Monarchians'. But Satan was also the son of God: he was even his eldest son and had been given the task of governing the heavens, aided by a multitude of angels who were subject to him. This is not unrelated to Christian traditions concerning Lucifer, which are found in certain versions of the Grail legend. Yet Satan, out of pride, had rebelled, drawing some of the angels into his rebellion. Yet as the revolt of Satan and the angels failed, they were cast out of the heavens: it was then that, in revenge, they created the earth and a second heaven, that of the stars.

In this conception, there is originally only one God, and ultimately only one principle. It is only following a rebellion that Evil makes its appearance, triggering the grotesque creation of matter. But care is taken not to explain *why* Satan rebelled. This is where moderate dualists constantly come up against a puzzle they are unable to solve. It is clear that radical dualism, by positing the eternal coexistence of the two principles, eliminates any problem of this sort. But, under these conditions, there is no longer any hope of

: the world will always be under Satan's control and all religious life is futile.

However, within his own realm, Satan created man from earth and water. He breathed his own spirit into him, but asked God to breathe a little of His own spirit into the being he had just created, so that this being might serve as a common link between them. This myth is rather strange: care is taken not to explain why Satan is so keen for man to be the link between him and God, and above all why God accepts the deal. It is worth noting that this myth resurfaces, in a latent form, in the legend of Merlin's birth and conception, as recounted by Robert de Boron in the 12th century, under the influence of the Cluniac monks: Merlin is then portrayed as the Primordial Man, son of a devil and a holy woman, endowed with powers drawn from both worlds. But just as in the case of Merlin, who, though endowed with 'satanic' powers, uses them for good, there is in the Bogomil myth a very clear allusion to the possibility that Man, through the gift he receives from God, can annihilate the evil principle and thus return to the state that preceded Satan's rebellion. Hope remains for salvation, not only for the individual himself, but for the whole of creation, including Satan.

So, to return to the Bogomil mythological account, God accepted Satan's proposal, placed a fragment of his spirit within Adam and did the same for Eve, after she had been created by Satan. But Satan, to give greater weight to his creation, encouraged the Serpent—that is, Consciousness—to persuade Eve to have sexual relations with Adam and to procreate. To punish him, God then stripped Satan of his divine form and deprived him of all creative power. But he left him free to manage the world he had already created.

Here, original sin is interpreted as the work of the flesh. It is perhaps no coincidence that the biblical text says:
'Adam *knew* Eve.' There is a curious connection between Knowledge as science or consciousness and sexual intercourse. From more, the Tree at the fruit forbidden is the one of the

Knowledge of Good and Evil, then, on a symbolic level, the knowledge of the difference between the two sexes. This could lead to other interpretations of Original Sin, which the Bogomils did not pursue: they merely denounced sexual intercourse as a ploy by Satan to perpetuate his creation. Hence the ban on procreation, at least for those believers who had attained sufficient maturity and knowledge to practise chastity.

For the Bogomils, like the Manicheans, had two kinds of followers. The Elect, having reached a higher stage, were required to strictly observe all the commandments and recite prayers, seven during the day and five at night. The others were mere Believers who had not yet managed to eliminate within themselves the temptations that Satan fostered there through the presence of his spirit.

But the Believers had the possibility of becoming 'Pure Ones'. This took place during a ceremony which has its equivalent among the Cathars and resembles the laying on of hands practised by the Manicheans. It was a sort of baptism of the Holy Spirit, which the Bogomils formally opposed to Christian baptism, which they deemed worthless. This 'sacrament', so to speak, was presumably conferred after a long period of preparation or initiation. The new Elect One had to confess, spend a certain time in prayer and meditation, and observe a fast. After which, in the presence of an assembly of the Elect and Believers, he received his final consecration, which incorporated him into the category of the Elect. It seems that, during this ceremony, the ritual consisted merely of placing the Gospel on the head of the new Elect and reciting the *Lord's Prayer*, whilst the participants in the assembly sang hymns whilst holding hands.

This metaphysical mythology is accompanied by a belief in reincarnation. This is not explicitly stated in the texts relating to the Bogomils, but this belief, as with the Manichaeans, cannot be ruled out, since it

resolves the problem of the Believers, who would be irremediably condemned if they did not have the possibility of reincarnation and thus of purifying their divine spiritual element with each well-lived incarnation. Certain Bogomil sects, which professed a radical dualism, denied the Resurrection of the Flesh and the Last Judgement. But the Bogomils seemed to accept the transmigration of souls, not for the Pure, who were definitively delivered, but for the Believers, who had to, in a sense, complete their Purgatory in their successive earthly lives. It is true that the doctrine of Reincarnation is contrary to the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection at the Last Judgement.

The Bogomils persisted for quite some time in Bulgaria and throughout the Byzantine Empire, both in territories under imperial rule and in those conquered by the Muslims. They were hunted down and persecuted, particularly by Christians. But they infiltrated the Balkans and moved westwards, particularly after 1140, when Emperor Manuel Comnenus took vigorous measures against them and their influence in the city. They were then found in large numbers in the territories that now make up Yugoslavia, on the Dalmatian coast and in northern Italy. Soon they infiltrated Italian cities, advancing towards Occitania and northern France. A document copied from the records of the Inquisition in Carcassonne mentions 'the secret of the heretics of Concorezzo, brought from Bulgaria by Bishop Nazaire'. For in the Middle Ages, in the West, the focus was not on the Bogomils, but on *the Bulgarians*, or the *Bougres*, so named because of the country where the Bogomils had their most enduring settlement.

Did the Bogomils reach Montségur and give rise to Catharism? One might be tempted to see a direct link between the Bogomils and the Cathars: their respective doctrines share more than obvious similarities, and both were dualists. Furthermore, the name 'Bugarach', in the Razès region, clearly attests, if not to the

of Bulgarian Bogomils in the region, at least of a connection between the Bulgarian and Albigensian heresies. Moreover, in Occitania, a number of figurative monuments have been found that irresistibly evoke Bogomil art, if only the famous disc-shaped crosses. There are many such crosses in Occitania. There are some in Bulgaria. But there are also some in Sweden, the country of origin of the Visigoths.

It is difficult to draw any conclusions about these stone crosses. We know that the Bogomils refused to venerate the Cross as the Romans had imposed it. For them, the Cross was not the instrument of Jesus's torture, but a solar symbol, or a geometric representation of the man Jesus, with four branches representing the head, the two arms and the legs. It therefore represents a *living Christ* and not a god who died on an instrument of torture reserved for the lowest classes. For them, as later for the Cathars, Jesus could only be depicted as a living Man, with his arms wide open, or with his head replaced by a solar representation which implied an entirely different meaning. And when the Bogomils and the Cathars used the Latin cross, they never depicted the body of Jesus on it, believing that such a representation was humiliating and base. Later, the Protestants would do the same. And, among the Cathars, the rosette was sometimes used to symbolise the solar Christ.

Whilst not denying a possible Bogomil influence on certain crosses discovered in Occitania, it must be noted that such crosses were commonplace in a region that fell under the jurisdiction of the Counts of Toulouse. Why insist on seeing them as Cathar or Bogomil symbols at all costs? The four-pointed cross within a circle forms part of the coat of arms of the Counts of Toulouse, and it is very ancient, dating well before the Cathar period. Many scholars have examined the issue of these crosses.
'esotericists' and 'hermetists' of all stripes have poured out torrents of words on these crosses. Admittedly, they are intriguing. But if one were curious enough to look, for example, at the Cabinet des Médailles de the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, the

If one were to examine the Gallic coins of the Volques Tectosages, who inhabited Languedoc in Caesar's time, one would notice that a large proportion of these coins bear the famous four-pointed cross inscribed within a circle – the mysterious disc-shaped cross. In the Toulouse region of Occitania, this cross is undoubtedly Celtic; archaeology and numismatics tell us as much. It has nothing to do with the Bogomils, nor with the Cathars, except that it belongs to both the Bulgarian and Occitan cultural spheres. And also, let us not forget, to the Swedish cultural sphere from which the Visigoths originated.

That said, it seems unthinkable to deny that there were contacts between the Bogomils and the future Cathars. Their doctrines are too similar. And certain figurative monuments other than crosses show, as René Nelli points out, 'that there were, between the Bogomils and the Cathars, the same connections in terms of figurative symbolism as there were in religious and philosophical terms. We do not, of course, claim that the Bogomils invented these themes, but we believe that it was from them that the Cathars **borrowed** them[17]". The matter seems settled.

In any case, Bogomilism is, in essence, an original blend of a serious effort to realise a reformed Christian morality in this world, and a dualism initially lived out in daily life before becoming a dogma. "Bogomilism is very closely related to the extraordinary heretical movement of the West and brought dualist teaching to it. But Bogomils and Cathars are by no means identical. Nor is the West, not even in the heretics whom it has for the most part persecuted, a mere copy of the East. The teachings, the Scriptures and the missionaries may have come from the East. But heresy in the West, since the beginning of this millennium, had its own laws and its own distinct character[18]."

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[17] René Nelli, *The Cathar Phenomenon*, Toulouse, Privat, 1964, p. 188.

[18] Arno Borst, *Les Cathares*, Paris, Payot, 1974, p. 65.

One must indeed be wary of similarities and avoid superimposing cultures that are very different in origin and essence onto one another. Whilst analogies between two religious traditions may be obvious and genuine, this does not automatically mean that one derives from the other.

While the East had its heresies, the West was no exception. There had been numerous debates at the councils, and everywhere, new ideas gave rise to movements ranging from the formation of sects to, at times, mere preaching without any lasting impact. The great fear of the year 1000 had only encouraged small-time prophecy, and something of this remained in people's minds, even though they knew the end of the world was not coming the very next day.

In the early years of the 11th century, a peasant from Champagne returned one day from his fields, drove his wife away and, after smashing the church's crucifix, refused to pay the tithe to the priest and delivered eloquent speeches rejecting the books of the Old Testament. He soon gained followers among the peasants, but, ultimately abandoned by all, he threw himself into a well. Was he mad? One can, however, recognise in his madness certain elements well known from Bogomilism.

In 1018, in Aquitaine, a large group formed which challenged the authority of the Cross, baptism and marriage, and refused to eat certain foods. In 1022, in the vicinity of Toulouse, heretics with mysterious teachings gathered, having come from various regions of the West. In 1022, a peasant from the Périgord drew a few nobles and some priests from Sainte-Croix d'Orléans into his preaching: they went on to spread the good word as far as Rouen. And what they proposed, supposedly to reform the Church, was quite simply Bogomil theories. For them, matter was impure; marriage, baptism, confession and the Eucharist must be rejected, as must the ecclesiastical hierarchy, so-called pious works and prayers. 'True Christians' live on heavenly food, and the believer is purified by the laying on of hands. Condemned to the stake by order of King Robert II, they went

settled there with a smile and accepted their fate as men certain of immediately gaining entry to the ‘Paradise of Light’.

Examples of all kinds abound during this period. The former Provençal priest Pierre de Bruis travelled through the south of France, proclaiming that churches should be demolished, that the crucifix should be burned rather than worshipped as the instrument of Christ’s torment, and that people should pray anywhere, even in a stable. Pierre de Bruis was burned at the stake in 1126. In Flanders, it was a layman named Tanchelm who unleashed against the Church which had become a veritable
“damn it”. He claimed that every human being was as close to God as Christ could be, for he possessed the Holy Spirit and was the spouse of the Virgin Mary. At the same time, a former Cluniac monk, Henri the Heretic, an extraordinary orator, was carrying out missionary work throughout the south of France. He railed against the Church, and his followers, who regarded him as an angel from heaven, acted on his fiery sermons: they desecrated churches, burned crucifixes, beat up priests and forced monks to marry, usually to prostitutes, who were then expected to lead an honourable life within the marriage. In Brittany, the strange Éon de l’Étoile fancied himself to be ‘He who will come to judge the living and the dead’. He gathered a group of followers with whom he plundered churches, castles and monasteries, then distributed part of the wealth thus accumulated to the peasants. His activities took place in the Forest of Brocéliande, not far from the famous Barenton spring. Éon claimed to possess magical powers and used them to the opportunity on of foreign . His followers the named
‘Lord of Lords’. He claims that he will judge the world entrusted to him by God through fire. His sceptre is shaped like a Y. When the two arms are raised towards the sky, it signifies that two-thirds of the world belong to God the Father. When those same branches are turned downwards, two-thirds of this world belong to Eon. Of course, Eon of the Star plays on the homophony of his name with the *‘eum’* of the liturgy (*Per Eum qui venturus est judicare vivos et mortuos*). In 1148, he was dragged before a council presided over by the Pope and condemned to

prison where he would die. Was he mad? One should note the undeniable connection between his name and the Gnostic *Aeons*, those demigods who rule over the intermediate worlds.

Most of these heretics are in reality 'enlightened ones', sometimes acting in good faith, often convinced that they are going to bring about profound reforms in a Church that is far from setting an example of perfection. They all seek a certain form of unadorned life in contrast to a world where injustice flourishes and where the wealth of a few is scandalously displayed in the face of the poverty of the masses. They are up against a formidable force: they all end up at the stake or in prison.

But they are not intellectuals. The arguments they put forward are extremely simple, not to say elementary, and in any case perfectly obvious. This has nothing to do with theology. Yet the time has come when a heresy can only endure if it is underpinned by a body of dogma. And it is the Cathars who will provide that *body* of *dogma*.

V

THE CATHARS

It was in the 12th century that the Cathars truly emerged in Western Europe as members of a distinct sect, rather than as Bogomils. The reason they were no longer referred to as Bogomils was that they were no longer Bogomils. They had, in a sense, merged into something else, and whilst the Bogomil heritage is significant, it does not constitute the entirety of the Cathars' beliefs and practices.

In any case, Catharism does not present itself as a coherent and organised system, encompassing all spheres of religious life within a traditional framework. Nor is it a meeting point for heterogeneous sects brought together solely by the vagaries of history. Rather, it was a loose sequence of lived experiences and aspirations which, little by little, coalesced into a dogma and a practical morality. The unity of Catharism lies, in fact, in the pooling of experiences which, at the outset, were merely attempts to give a profound meaning to life in an incoherent world marked by Evil.

The basis of this spiritual experience is, of course, the irreconcilable contradiction between the soul of the pure man and the world, which is evil. And whatever the various schools of thought that can be distinguished within Catharism—notably the so-called radical dualist position and the so-called moderate dualist position—we always return to the same premise: 'In the beginning,

There were two principles: that of Good and that of Evil; and within them, from all eternity, existed Light and Darkness. From the principle of Good comes all that is Light and Spirit; from the principle of Evil comes all that is Matter and Darkness. ' These words form part of a creed of the Florentine Cathars. It is clear that the Cathars adopted the dualist doctrine of the Manicheans and the Bogomils. But one problem has not yet been fully explained, let alone resolved: that of the Fall of the Angels. Why did Satan rebel and drag other angels (some say *all* angels) down with him, angels who are now human souls, trapped in Matter and subject to Imperfection and Evil?

The Bogomils spoke only of rebellion. The Judeo-Christian tradition leans towards pride, the Sin against the Spirit. It is all rather vague. The Cathars, for their part, without saying so, refer to verses 6:1–3 of *Genesis*: 'When men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they took wives for themselves from among all those they chose. Then the Lord said: "My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for man is but flesh, and his days shall be a hundred and twenty years."'

These verses are far from clear. They undoubtedly stem from an archaic tradition that was no longer fully understood in Moses's time and which was misplaced within the chronology of *Genesis*. But the essential point remains that the Sons of God—that is to say, the Angels—were overcome by lust. One would still need to know what the 'daughters of men' actually are within the context of the myth, for it is evident that, in the Cathar perspective, this fall of the Angels could only have taken place before the creation of the world.

The moderate Cathars, like the Orthodox Christians, maintained that Lucifer, the beautiful and good Archangel, had been deceived by an *evil spirit*. But in asserting this, they upheld an absolute dualist view by positing the existence

the very essence of an evil principle. Radical dualists offer a more logical explanation: Satan-Lucifer rebelled against God out of jealousy, but he acted alone. He was therefore cast out. But he wants revenge and to draw the other angels to him. He waits thirty-two years at the gates of heaven, and the following year hides himself within God's kingdom to secretly extol his treasures to the other angels, and particularly the charms of a woman. The angels, curious, have no idea what a woman might be. So Satan brings them a woman – whom he has just created – and who may be the Lilith of Hebrew tradition – and presents her to them. The angels, inflamed with mad lust, shatter the glittering celestial vault and fight alongside Satan to secure his dominion over the kingdom of Light. But their bodies are laid low and their souls fall. All this recalls the battles described in Indo-European cosmogonies. Yet the Vanir who attack the Aesir gods in Germanic-Scandinavian mythology do not originate from the divine world: they come from elsewhere. Furthermore, after this unrelenting war, the Aesir and the Vanir make peace and form a single group, which is not the case in the Cathar myth. Only the tale of Prometheus, the Titan who rebelled against the other Olympian Titans, bears clear parallels with the fall of the Angels, and it ends with Prometheus being chained to Mount Caucasus.

According to Cathar mythology, nine long, heavy nights and nine days follow one another, descending from the heavens, denser than blades of grass or raindrops, until finally, God, in his wrath, inquires as to what is happening and decrees that never again shall a woman pass through the gates of the Kingdom of Light.

Here, one can observe a rather clear anti-feminism, which is somewhat surprising given that there were many women among the Cathars, and that there is no shortage of examples of 'Perfect Ones' who went to the very end of their faith. One can also interpret the nine nights and nine days as the
' al days', or , known as the 'centuries' (long

periods), of which the *Vedas* speak (one day of Brahma corresponds to four billion years), and consider the early era of modern science.

To understand the Cathar myth, we must again refer to verses 1:6–7 of *Genesis*: 'And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." And God made the expanse, and separated the waters that are under the expanse from the waters that are above the expanse. " The nine nights and nine days *that follow* are likened to raindrops and blades of grass. This refers, in fact, to the famous separation of the waters of heaven and earth, in other words, the creation of a *distinct* space, which would become Satan's domain. These mythological concepts are not unrelated to modern scientific observations. Indeed, the Earth's position, 150 million kilometres from the Sun, places it very close to the centre of a zone where temperatures allow water to exist in solid, liquid and gaseous forms. This zone is very small, comprising approximately 2% of the solar system's radius. Human existence therefore appears to be linked to these two conditions: water, in its three forms, and universal gravitation. This shows just how significant water is in mythologies. Nor is it for nothing that water plays an essential role in religions. But what we must remember above all about the Cathar myth is that it links the emergence of life on Earth with the fall of the Angels.

Of course, the myth solves nothing. It merely raises unanswerable questions. How does the rebellious Satan manage to enter the Kingdom of Light? Was God aware of this (since He inquires about what is happening)? Is God a powerless witness, or *does He will* evil? How could the Angels sin if there was no evil within them? What is sin? The least one can say is that the Cathar myth does not shine for its logic. But neither does the text of *Genesis*.

The fact remains that it was the Devil who created all visible and perishable things, including, amongst other things, human bodies. God, for his part, a created ce qui dure, l'Invisible et l'âme humaine

incorruptible. The moderate Cathars then add something: when Satan had finished creating the world with his fallen angels, God sent to earth an angel who had remained faithful to him, and that angel was Adam, of whom the Cathars claimed to be the direct heirs. Unfortunately, this Angel was captured by Satan: he was forced to take on human form, but because of this involuntary constraint, he will ultimately be saved, and all his descendants with him.

In other versions of the Cathar myth, Satan struggles to breathe life into the lifeless forms he has created. This goes on for thirty years. But every time these bodies of mud dry out in the sun, the water—that is to say, the blood—evaporates. God, who knows all things, commands the Angels who roam the underworld not to fall asleep during their stay on earth. Of course, the Angels succumb to sleep, and whilst they do so, Satan seizes them and places them within the lifeless bodies he had fashioned.

Although a variation on the main myth, this version is nevertheless closely linked to it: in more ontological terms, it concerns the capture of the divine Archetype by the human Archetype. But this cannot be done without sexual connotations. The Sleeping Angels are subject to nocturnal lust. Indeed, in certain Cathar texts, the constellations were said to commit lewd acts at night, and this cosmic lust was referred to *as coitus* in astrology. On a more psychological level, and within the medieval context, we find here the famous belief in incubi and succubi, those male or female demons who come to unite with human beings during the night, taking advantage of their sleep: Merlin the Enchanter represents the perfect embodiment of the product of this union between an incubus demon and a woman. It goes without saying that, beyond the intervention of incubi and succubi, one must consider certain erotic physiological reactions arising during sleep and leading to those nocturnal emissions against which good Christians were warned.

This interpretation is also worth considering because it highlights the link between human beings and the cosmos: their bodies may be made of clay, but their souls are angelic; they belong to the world above. And all human behaviour amounts to a constant search for balance between the weight of matter and the lightness of the celestial element that animates it. Of course, the fundamental problem remains unresolved: how could a soul of such a subtle, celestial and immaterial nature have been so easily confined within a coarse and heavy body? It was then that the Cathars, proponents of absolute dualism, proposed a solution: the angelic soul, though indeed imprisoned within the human body, has nevertheless left its angelic body in Heaven. The angelic being, having become human, is thus torn apart, *separated*. And it will inevitably yearn to leave its physical body to regain its angelic body.

The solution is ingenious in that it explains the human being's inherent need for spirituality, that sense of transcendence within them. But these same radical Cathars introduce a third element into what is to become a true dialectical argument: there is, they say, a link between the body and the soul of the *separated* angel. This link is the Spirit, which floats between Heaven and Earth, seeking the soul it recognises as its double. When it has found it, enlightenment occurs: at that moment, Man becomes *a Cathar*, that is to say, 'Perfect'. And as he is no longer *separated* (this is the meaning of *'sexed'*), he no longer has sexual desires, no longer lusts, and is ready to return to Heaven.

Here we find the notion of the triad already seen in Mazdeism: human existence is due to three principles, the Body, the Soul and the Spirit, whatever specific meanings one may ascribe to each term. This explanation has the merit of offering a solution to the problem of Jesus' resurrection.

Recent scientific studies have shown that the famous Shroud of Turin once wrapped a dead man

tortured. Was it Christ? That is not the question. Today, scientists of all persuasions who have examined and analysed the shroud have come to the following conclusion: a corpse was wrapped in this cloth, but it was not unwrapped, and it no longer contains any part of the body. This means that the body enclosed in the shroud could have emerged from the rolled-up shroud without it being unrolled. Make of that what you will, since it defies the laws of nature and common sense. The scientists draw no conclusions from this, nor is it their role to do so. They merely observe. But if we return to the Cathar theory that the Angels captured by Satan had left their bodies in Heaven, we may suppose that Jesus, who is merely an Angel to the Cathars, came to earth not enclosed in a carnal and demonic body, but in his heavenly body.

The figure of Jesus Christ is, of course, central to the Cathars. It is in this regard that they differ most from other Christians, particularly concerning the place and nature that should be attributed to Jesus. Generally speaking, for the Cathars, Jesus is neither the Son of God, nor the Son of Man, nor the cornerstone of the Scriptures. His role between the original fall and the return to Heaven is no more significant than his existence: he is a preacher, not a saviour. Radical dualists claimed that Christ was an angel who, unlike the fallen angels, had no connection with sin, that is to say with the fleshly body: hence his resurrection – which is not really a resurrection – and his ascension to Heaven. As for Mary, she is an angel and is not the mother of Christ in the fleshly sense of the term. Jesus merely *entered through Mary's ear* and took on a human form devoid of any carnal weakness. This is the famous theme of conception through the ear, that is to say *through the Word*, which is strangely reflected in the Celtic depiction of Ogmios-Ogma, god of strength and eloquence.

Moderate dualists have adopted this view. However, since, for them, God is nonetheless the creator of matter, they do not oppose the incarnation of Christ. From their perspective,

the Angel Christ became Man in Mary, and shed his physical body at his ascension. The resurrection can therefore be regarded as real. But the Cathars do not seem to have reached a consensus on the figure of Jesus.

Some say that if he came to earth, it was because he, too, had sinned and had been subject to all human weaknesses. Others retort that he appeared on earth only in a fleshly form, but in reality with his angelic body. Some even go so far as to suggest the parallel existence of two Christs. The earthly Christ, the one who died in Jerusalem, was no doubt wicked, and this Mary Magdalene, an adulterous and wanton woman whom he defended, was, without a doubt, his concubine. The true Christ, the heavenly Christ, who neither ate nor drank, was born and crucified in an invisible world. A curious notion… The assertion of the existence of an earthly Christ as Mary Magdalene's concubine – or husband – would, much later, give rise to strange tales centred around Rennes-le-Château, where there is, in fact, a church dedicated to Mary Magdalene. According to these obviously unverifiable accounts, Mary Magdalene, wife of the earthly Jesus, is said to have settled in the Razès region *with her children* – that is, with the children of the earthly Jesus – and it was they who, allied with a Frankish family, are said to have been the ancestors of the **Merovingian** line. Cathar theology sometimes leads to mysterious realms…

Ultimately, the real issue is what Jesus – whether earthly or heavenly – came to do on earth. Some say that, having himself committed the sin of the flesh, he had to atone for his own sin and, at the same time, atone for the sins of all the other angels. Another theory claims that Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross served no purpose: it is merely a mythological event, and whilst Jesus was crucified on earth, Satan was crucified in Heaven. Dualism rears its head once again and ultimately leads to the notion that

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[19] See, from the same publisher, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* by M. Baigent, R. Leigh and H. Lincoln.

Jesus and Satan are both sons of God: there is the good son and the evil son. This, at any rate, is the view favoured by the restorers of the church at Rennes-le-Château, who placed two figures of the infant Jesus on either side of the altar. However, the last of the Cathars tended increasingly to accept the orthodox Christian doctrine that Christ is both God and Man. It must be said that, having discussed this subject at length and expressed opinions as divergent as they were strange, they no longer knew where they stood.

In any case, the Cathars, whether radical or moderate, all agreed that Jesus had brought a message and had shown the path of renunciation, a path necessary to ensure one's salvation. Whilst the Fall of the Angel constitutes the starting point of Cathar doctrine, the return to Heaven and total liberation from matter are the clearly stated ultimate goals. Thus, human beings live on this earth to do penance, to atone for their separation from God and to regain their angelic state. On this point, there is no divergence among the various strands of Cathar thought.

This leads to an eschatology and the formulation of a moral code.

Human beings are the descendants of the fallen angels, and thus of the angels themselves, either by heredity or through the transmigration of souls. Radical dualists went so far as to put forward this proposition: 'My soul is the soul of an angel who, since the Fall, has transmigrated through many bodies as through many prisons. ' Moderate dualists claimed that this succession of soul to soul and body to body would continue until the end of time. Only the Perfect Ones no longer needed to be reincarnated: their souls awaited in a sort of temporary paradise the Day of Judgement, when God would separate the good from the wicked. But here they are at odds with the position held by other moderate dualists, who claim that the End of Time will only come when all souls have been saved. On the other hand, radical dualists say that the liberated soul of the Perfect One gains

immediately into Heaven, whilst the soul of one who is not yet Perfect must be reincarnated until complete purification is achieved. And these same radicals go so far as to envisage the possibility of reincarnation in animal form, as punishment for a dissolute life, for example, or for a lack of effort towards purification.

That said, the end of the world will be terrifying, for moderate dualists. The earth will fall prey to fire unless it is transformed into a hell of flames or decomposed, thus returning to divine chaos. Here again, the links with Norse mythology are evident. But the radicals assert that nothing on earth will change once the number of those reintegrated has been reached. It is clear that the Cathars' eschatological vision is rather confused, and indeed, as they evolved, they tended to incorporate orthodox Christian eschatology, which in no way undermines their fundamental doctrine.

Morality appears far more precise, and much simpler. It starts from the observation that, ultimately, there is only one sin: that of breaking away from God. All other sins are specific forms of this sin. The only question was whether this original sin had been *committed freely* or *involuntarily*. Moderate dualists affirmed free will, whilst the radicals denied it. But both schools of thought agreed that whoever refuses to belong to the world thereby demonstrates that they do not belong to this world and are therefore not subject to Satan. Thus, for a Cathar, to sin is to be subject to the world. There can therefore be no distinction between venial and mortal sin: all sin is mortal.

Thus, when it comes to sexual relations, the Cathars hold a view that seems rather unusual. Any sexual union involves the flesh and risks prolonging Satan's work indefinitely: it is therefore a sin. And, under these circumstances, sexual relations within marriage are no better than sexual relations outside marriage. There is no difference. It is this stance that led to the Cathars being accused of being lax and of permitting everything. Indeed, they make no distinction whatsoever

ranging from legitimate to illegitimate relationships, free love, homosexuality, adultery or incest, and even bestiality. But their accusers might have recalled that in the early days of the Church, the Church—greatly inspired by Saint Paul and the Church Fathers—had arrived at much the same understanding. And it was because, on the one hand, the survival of the species had to be ensured, and on the other, because human nature had to be taken into account, that the Roman Church eventually came to tolerate marriage, whilst at the same time reducing it to its procreative function and condemning all other forms of sexuality. It must also be made clear that the Church *merely tolerates* marriage. It is not the Church that marries the couple. It is not the priest who unites them. *It is the couple themselves*, and the priest is there merely as a witness, to take note of the event. The sacrament of marriage, insofar as there is a sacrament, is conferred by the spouses upon themselves, and under their own responsibility: contemporary Catholics, completely brainwashed by the clergy's moralising rhetoric, no longer even realise this reality which, it must be said, represents a fine example of hypocrisy on the part of the Roman Church. In any case, this
'Laxity' was not a characteristic of the Perfect Ones, since they observed strict continence: they had reached a stage
of spiritual evolution that no longer allowed for any weakness. The situation was different for the simple Believers: still too attached to the material world, they could marry or live in a non-marital relationship. And, in certain Cathar groups, it was almost preferable to have sexual relations outside marriage, as they were not intended for procreation: thus, instead of two sins, there was only one. One can imagine that this way of thinking may have led to certain excesses and outbursts, which the Inquisitors were quick to denounce.

But the Perfect Ones have many other obligations besides abstinence. They must abstain from all food derived from procreation: meat, which is diabolical flesh, is strictly forbidden. But cheese,

eggs and milk. Curiously, fish is permitted, because, in Cathar belief, fish were not the fruit of procreation, but a spontaneous product of the water. However, fish and wine were avoided on fasting days, when one must make do with bread and water.

There is also, within Cathar moral precepts, a major prohibition, at least for the Perfect Ones: one must not kill under any circumstances. And this prohibition extends to animals which, according to the doctrine of reincarnation, may harbour the souls of certain men—and thus of certain angels forced to be reborn in a lower form because of the sins of their previous lives. This goes very far indeed, to the point of rejecting any act of self-defence that risks killing or even injuring the attacker. As vegetarians, the Cathars are also fundamentally committed to non-violence. The death penalty is murder, for the punishment and execution of criminals are God's business and not that of the Pope, the Emperor or any sovereign.

This ban caused the Cathars many problems, particularly at the height of the repression against them. During the Albigensian Crusade, whilst the Perfecti never took up arms, many Believers—who were not bound to observe this prohibition strictly—took part in the fighting and even committed murders, such as that of the Inquisitors at Avignonnet. But for the most part, it was mercenaries and unconverted sympathisers who defended the Cathars: this was clearly seen at Montségur in 1244. And it is likely that the Knights Templar, whose role was officially very low-key during the Albigensian Crusade, intervened on their behalf on the battlefield on certain occasions. Opponents of the Cathars even claimed that the Templars were the secular arm of the Parfaits.

For the rest, Cathar morality largely coincided with that of orthodox Christians and most other heretics. The essential point was not to prohibit, but to demonstrate that certain actions slowed down or even

hindered the process of returning to one's angelic origins. The more a Cathar became aware of their angelic nature, the more they avoided opportunities to sin. Cathar morality is of a very high standard in that it does not merely lay down negative rules. On the contrary, it is a positive morality that encourages perseverance in the pursuit of purity. And it was this aspect that appealed to the men and women who encountered the Perfect Ones. There were many Cathars, proof that their example was convincing and that their moral code was seen as satisfactory. Finally, the religious ritual, which was extremely simple, had the power to attract the faithful who were weary of the endless Roman ceremonies.

As with the Bogomils and all other dualists, the rituals observed by the Cathars were kept to a strict minimum. These consisted of prayers, hymns, fasting on certain days of the week, and above all, preaching. The Perfecti were, above all, men of the Word. It is likely that the sermons were followed by discussions in which all listeners could participate. Prayers and sermons took place anywhere: in the open countryside, in the woods, in castles or private homes. It does not appear that the Cathars had temples, whatever mystery enthusiasts may think who see Montségur as a Cathar temple, or a Manichaean temple, or even a solar temple. Montségur, like certain other places, certainly played a special role, but as a symbolic site, as a spiritual 'centre', in the same vein as Mount Meru in India or Tara Hill in Ireland. But one cannot speak of a 'temple' in the strict sense of the word, which in no way detracts from the importance of this site, which is undeniably sacred.

Like the Bogomils, the Cathars rejected the sacraments of the Roman Church, including baptism: as they were all angels, the Cathars had no need for a ritual act that was supposed to bring them into the divine community; they were already there, but in a state of 'dormition'. And it was up to them to become aware of this state and to remedy it.

They naturally rejected marriage – which, at the time, could only be Catholic to be considered official, since there was no secular civil registry – and made do with a vague civil ritual. Consequently, in the eyes of the Inquisitors, married Cathars (who were simply Believers) were regarded as cohabitants. And whilst not recognising the sacrament of Penance, the Cathars practised a sort of public confession: the Perfect Ones confessed their sins before an assembly of Perfect Ones and Believers, much as was the practice among the Manicheans.

The only sacrament, if it can be called that, practised by the Cathars was the famous *consolamentum*. It took two distinct forms, corresponding to two different circumstances. First, there was the *consolamentum* given to a Believer who wished to enter – and who believed himself worthy – into the category of the Perfects. In this case, the new Perfect had to undertake to observe in full the rules to which those who claimed to have attained a sufficient degree of wisdom and purity were bound. It was an act of the utmost gravity, for one could receive it – or be *invested* with it – only once in one's lifetime. This explains the rigour, austerity, tenacity and faith of the Perfect Ones, and their peaceful acceptance of death when condemned to the stake. To renounce their faith was to renounce their *consolamentum* forever; it was to regress, at the risk of finding oneself in a lower state in a future incarnation.

Another form of *consolamentum* could be conferred by the Perfects upon the Believers at their simple request, but only when they were in mortal danger. It was, in a sense, the equivalent of the baptism that any Christian may administer to someone who has not yet been baptised and who is in mortal danger. But this *consolamentum* was not permanent: if the person survived, it lapsed, and it could be conferred several times, depending on the circumstances.

In both cases, the ritual was the same. The Believer who wished to become Perfect was asked if he wanted to

to return to God and the Gospel. If he answered in the affirmative, he was made to promise that in future he would abstain from all forbidden or discouraged food, that he would no longer engage in carnal relations, that he would no longer lie, that he would no longer swear, and that he would never again abandon the Cathar community, even if faced with the threat of death by fire, water or any other means. Once these promises had been made, the candidate recited the *Pater*, the only Catholic prayer permitted, though reserved for the Perfects – because the *Pater* was regarded as the prayer spoken by the Angels before the throne of God – and in its heretical version: instead of *panem quotidianum*, one says *panem supersubstantialem*, 'bread beyond substance', because, for the Cathars, material bread was merely a diabolical creation, like everything else. And after the recitation of *this*
'heretical' Lord's Prayer, the Perfect Ones laid their hands on the newly elected member and placed the 'Book'—undoubtedly the Gospel—upon his head. Finally, they embraced him and the entire assembly prostrated themselves before him.

There is also another, very distinctive rite, known to us only in connection with the siege of Montségur in 1244: the *convinenza*. This was a variant of *the consolamentum* intended for times of war, designed for men-at-arms who risked being mortally wounded and losing the power of speech. Before going into battle, they 'agreed' with the Perfects that the *consolamentum* would be administered to them without their having to answer the customary questions and without reciting the *Lord's Prayer*. But this *convinenza* seems to have been a wholly exceptional act.

That leaves the question of *endurance*. As the Cathars held such a profoundly pessimistic view of the world, their opponents did not hesitate to portray them as candidates for suicide: logically speaking, men who believed themselves to be angels trapped within a physical body might be tempted to cut corners and flee their prison as quickly as possible. Moreover, their courage in the face of death—even the most horrific kind, at the stake—and the hunger strikes undertaken by some of them whilst imprisoned in the dungeons of the Inquisition,

might lend credence to the theory of a sort of ritual suicide. But these were merely isolated cases, and there is no trace of any incitement to suicide in Cathar doctrine. On reflection, suicide would rather be an obstacle to the process of purification, which involves penance and suffering endured in this world. But what remains somewhat mysterious is the practice of *the endura*.

This practice is not an ancient one and concerns only the last of the Cathars, those of the 14th century. Thanks to the records of the Inquisition, we know that heretics, mainly women, undertook *'endura'*, that is to say, a prolonged fast, to the point of dying. This fast is said to have been ordered by the deacon of their community. The fact appears to be historically proven, and there are other examples of Cathars who are said to have gone into the mountains, in the depths of winter, to let themselves die of starvation and, above all, of the cold. But this practice is limited in time, to the early 14th century only, and in space, concerning only the region of Ussat-les-Bains and the upper Ariège valley. No examples are known from elsewhere, and certainly not from earlier periods when Catharism was highly organised. Undoubtedly, this *'endura'* should be seen as a final, desperate manifestation of the Cathar faith, at a time when Catharism had become a lost cause. This has not prevented certain contemporaries, who claim to be the Cathars of the 20th century, from promoting *the endura* as an authentic rite, even advocating it, and making it one of the most important elements of their doctrine. It should be noted that the notorious Otto Rahn, author of the book *The *Crusade Against the* Grail* and an undisputed Nazi who mysteriously disappeared in 1939, was credited with having performed *the endura* in the mountains on the **Austro-German** border. The sacred aspect of this suicide, well known and practised among the

[20] Because he was said to be of Jewish descent – something abhorrent and incompatible with his membership of the SS – Christian Bernadac puts forward arguments suggesting that he did not commit suicide, but was dismissed by his superiors, only to reappear later under a different identity.

The practice of the Eskimos of abandoning elderly people who had become useless to the tribe has fuelled many legends…

This shows, in any case, that around the year 1300, Catharism was on the verge of extinction and that each group of those who had escaped the Inquisition was acting independently. There was no longer any cohesion among the scattered Cathars. Yet this cohesion, this unity, one might say, was strong at the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th century. These Cathars formed dioceses. Within each diocese, apart from the great mass of Believers, there were the Parfaits, the 'Chosen' , those who claimed to be the alone
'Cathars', meaning 'the Pure Ones'. But among these Perfect Ones, some bore the title of deacons and were presumably entrusted with special missions, in particular preaching to people to be converted, or to believers to be strengthened in their faith. The word 'deacon' should not be misleading: the Cathars rejected any priestly hierarchy, and even the very idea of the priesthood. It was only through contact with Orthodox Christians, in order to oppose them more effectively, that they borrowed a vague hierarchical system from the Church, so as to coordinate their efforts and organise their defence in the face of repression.

Normally, it was the Believers and the Perfect Ones, gathered together in a single assembly, who chose those to whom responsibilities were to be entrusted. Some Cathars lived in isolation, as true hermits: these did not participate in community life. Others were therefore appointed *deacons* and generally lived in towns. It was from among them that preachers, sages and theologians were recruited. They were, in a sense, the spiritual guides of a community. But the assembly of the Perfect Ones was also responsible for electing a leader in charge of a diocese. He was given the title *of bishop*, but this was merely a convenient designation, nothing more. Moreover, if the bishop did not perform his duties satisfactorily, the assembly could remove him and choose another in his place. This bishop was at the service of the entire community

Cathar, with the exception of all priestly prerogatives. He is merely the first among his peers, and only on a temporary basis, depending on the circumstances. And he is chosen, in a sense, democratically. The bishop could be assisted by two coadjutors, a ‘major son’ and a ‘minor son’, who helped him in his duties, and if the bishop died, the major son succeeded him until the community had chosen another bishop. Thus was maintained a cohesion, unthinkable at first glance, within groups composed of men and women of different origins and sometimes professing divergent ideas, groups which fully embraced free discussion and never refused to be contradicted. One cannot speak of tolerance: it was rather out of a concern for a continual search for truth that the Cathars left behind a legacy of men and women of exemplary piety and great intellectual honesty. But it is also for this reason that they posed a threat to the Roman Catholic Church: they set a bad example both to the Church’s faithful and to the populations that the Capetian monarchy sought to draw into its sphere of influence.

They therefore had to be eliminated. By any means necessary. And that is exactly what was done.

PART THREE

The Cathar Enigma

I

THE CATHARS AMONG US

It is a common saying that Catharism died with the surrender of Montségur, when the pyre was lit on which two hundred and five Perfect Ones perished, refusing to renounce their faith because they knew they were purified Angels assured of their return to the Kingdom of Light. This is a fact. After the tragedy of Montségur, the Cathars scattered or fell into the fearsome clutches of the Inquisition. There were, of course, resurgences and revivals over the course of a century: such a religion, founded on deep and unshakeable convictions, cannot vanish overnight by the decree of a tribunal, even an ecclesiastical one. But attrition took its toll. So did terror. And the Capetian royal administration, implemented by Alphonse de Poitiers, brother of Saint Louis and husband of Jeanne de Toulouse, had woven its gigantic spider's web across the whole of Occitania. From 1321 to 1335, numerous convictions for heresy were still handed down, but they tended to become increasingly rare. And by the end of the 14th century, following the early tragedies of the Hundred Years' War, the Inquisition was practically no longer active in Cathar territory, proof that heresy no longer existed.

It may be hard to admit, given that we know religions always leave their mark. Let's be clear: Catharism has indeed disappeared as an organised *and practised* religion. The same was true of Druidism following Caesar's conquest: forbidden to teach, the Druids initially sought refuge in the forests and inaccessible places, but their followers became increasingly scarce, and they eventually blended into nature, that is to say, integrated into new ways of thinking and new ways of life.

of spirituality: they became Christians. One can imagine a similar fate for the Cathars. Deprived of teaching, deprived of religious gatherings, scattered and taking refuge in inaccessible places, they eventually ceased to recognise one another, and they faded away into an era that no longer lent itself to speculations about the fall of the Angels. This does not mean that *the Cathar spirit* is dead. Just as the Celtic Druidic spirit remained very much alive in medieval civilisation and even within Christianity, particularly in the churches of Ireland and Brittany, the Cathar spirit seems to have persisted across much of Occitania. Generally speaking, the Occitans still display a very clear tendency towards heresy. In the 16th century, many of them would take up the banner of the Reformation. The history of Occitan Protestantism covers precisely those areas where Catharism had exerted a lasting influence. Let us not conclude from this that Protestantism is the heir to Catharism; that would be false: but this Protestantism developed in favourable terrain. Moreover, certain details point not to a direct lineage, but to a common source, stretching back through the ages, if only the famous Huguenot cross, which is the Occitan cross surmounted by a dove. It is difficult to deny a more or less vague connection between the symbolism of the Huguenot cross and certain Cathar motifs.

But all this amounts to nothing more than epiphenomena. That is why one must treat with extreme caution the numerous accounts—or pseudo-accounts—that have been published over the last hundred years regarding the survival of Catharism in the Montségur region, the upper Ariège valley and the Razès. And when one meets a man who claims in all seriousness to be one of the last Cathars, one cannot help but smile. I myself have met so many druids who are absolutely convinced of their beliefs, proclaiming them loudly and burdening themselves with paraphernalia that is more picturesque than serious, that I feel quite capable of engaging in dialogue with any member of any sect, even one dating from before the

flood. The Druids have long since disappeared, but since the late 18th century, various more or less esoteric groups have 'reinvented' Druidism, its doctrine and its rituals, even though, in all honesty, we must admit that we know next to nothing about the subject. These so-called 'modern-day druids', of whom there are many, are in reality 'neo-druids', and whatever their sincerity, whatever their motivations, it is impossible to recognise any connection between them and their ancient counterparts. Some of them are perfectly aware of this and say so openly and honestly. Unfortunately, others lack this tact, and whilst impressing an audience eager to believe their fanciful ramblings, they proclaim loudly that they are authentic druids, inspired by Heaven, of course. There are even some who perform their grotesque ceremonies amidst polystyrene menhirs (*sic*) with no respect for the sacred, nor any sense of the ridiculous. They form orders, with a hierarchy: druids dressed in white, bards dressed in blue, ovates dressed in green. The trouble is that *in all the Celtic languages* they are supposed to know, there is *no distinction between blue and green*; the same term is used for both colours. How on earth do they manage to keep track of it all?

I imagine the same is true today in Cathar Occitania. There must be a number of Cathars roaming the winding roads that cross the mountain passes and follow the valleys between Ussat-les-Bains and Rennes-les-Bains. Are these descendants of the Cathars genuine? That is a question I would be wary of answering. The Cathars have an advantage over the Druids: they can always claim reincarnation, in which they believed, whereas the Druids did not. A modern Cathar can, logically, claim to be the reincarnation of a Cathar from days of old: this is in keeping with the doctrine. A person claiming to be a Druid in the 20th century cannot do so, unless they are delusional about the transmigration of souls, which some have not hesitated to do.

It would, however, be more accurate to speak of neo-Cathars. Since the 14th century, the link has long since been broken, and any attempt to reconstruct the Cathar cult can only be a form of *neo-Catharism*. This, moreover, was the view of Déodat Roché, the pioneer of Cathar studies in Occitania, of whom René Nelli said that he was 'much more cautious, much more philosophical' than most of the would-be treasure hunters or seekers of the Grail who have swarmed the region since the turn of the century. "Roché did not indulge in all their daydreams," adds René Nelli, "but he too believed in the *ideal* existence of the Pyrenean Grail."

Déodat Roché was born in the Aude in 1875. From an early age preoccupied with philosophical speculation, he had sought out, first in ancient traditions and then in Manichaeism, the links leading to Catharism, which he regarded, with a certain sentimentality, as the very spirit of his native Occitania. He had made a career in the judiciary, but, having resigned from his post, he returned to settle in the Razès, in Arques – on whose territory lies the mysterious tomb identical to Nicolas Poussin's painting – and it was under his impetus that, around 1950, the Société du Souvenir et des Études Cathares was founded, which was to develop and become, even after Roché's death, an invaluable tool for scientific research into Catharism. There is a clearly expressed desire to trace the origins of Catharism and also its visible and invisible continuations. But all this is carried out in accordance with scientific rigour and with all the usual precautions, even if bold hypotheses have been put forward.

Déodat Roché had directed his personal quest towards what he believed to be a path of initiation, one that involved replacing faith with certainty through spiritual exercises that opened up horizons unknown to most people. In this quest, he drew on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, that captivating and fascinating figure who had founded the School of Anthroposophy following his intellectual disagreements

with the leaders of the Theosophical Society. It must be acknowledged that, quite apart from his genuine gifts and inner *vision*, Rudolph Steiner possessed a great deal of honesty, extending to the most meticulous scruples. He had not appreciated the Theosophical Society's unfortunate tendency to accept out of hand all so-called secret doctrines, nor the theosophists' submission to Far Eastern tradition. Steiner maintained that the West had its own tradition and that it was simply a matter of rediscovering it. It is understandable that Déodat Roché, trained in this school, was keen to contribute to the understanding of this Western tradition by studying Catharism and restoring it to a degree of relevance. Déodat Roché, convinced, like Steiner, that everything lies within us, worked in a highly effective manner towards this revival of Catharism, both within so-called occult circles and in the minds of the general public, as well as in the region itself. For this reason, he deserves the admiration and respect of all those who honestly seek to understand who the Cathars were.

Such was not Antonin Gadal, chairman of the Ussat-les-Bains Tourist Office, a modest retired schoolteacher, deeply influenced by a form of theosophy that this former agnostic had, in fact, grasped rather poorly. Admittedly, he was in love with his region, ready to do anything to promote it, with the utmost selflessness. He was also one of those incorrigible dreamers of whom René Nelli speaks.

Antonin Gadal was born in the Sabarthès, in that high valley of the Ariège where the caves have preserved the memory of many bygone eras. In his youth, before the First World War, he had met Adolphe Garrigou, who had devoted his life to archaeological and scriptural research on the subject of Catharism. Inspired by Garrigou, Gadal became his devoted disciple. But he was not content merely to conduct research, explore caves, or meditate on medieval Gnosticism. He 'invented' the Pyrenean Holy Grail based on a few vague studies of Wagner and *Parzival*, published a biography of Adolphe Garrigou and a sort of

a historical novel about Cathar initiation as he had imagined it. Later, he published a work entitled **De l'héritage des Cathares* (*On the Legacy of the *Cathars)*, in which he explicitly identified those he believed to be the present-day heirs to the Cathar tradition: the Rose + Croix of Holland, now known as the Spiritual School of the Golden Rose + Croix. The remarkable poet Maurice Magre had already linked the Rose + Croix to the Cathars, and had claimed that Kristian Rosenkreutz, founder of the Rosicrucians, was a Cathar initiate instructed by Albigensian refugees in Germany. Apart from the fact that Kristian Rosenkreutz is a mythical figure, this connection is not, a priori, at all absurd. And that is why, in Ussat-les-Bains, there is a rest and meditation centre of the Rose + Croix **d'Or**[21]. The members of this philosophical society intend, even today, to continue the work of Antonin Gadal, who died in 1966, and to uphold the Cathar legacy. They have established a Gadal Museum in Ussat and never miss an opportunity to pay tribute to the memory of the 'faithful and tireless disseminator of Cathar mysteries', the 'beloved brother', this 'old servant of the preceding brotherhood'.

That is to say, the role played by Antonin Gadal. He did not merely dream; he shared his dreams with others, and he influenced countless gullible people who, disregarding the most objective archaeological evidence, took part in a massive hoax that borders on outright dishonesty, and in any case constitutes clear intellectual dishonesty.

In the wake of this, people began to see Cathars everywhere. Cathar graffiti was discovered in every cave and every castle. They even discovered the Holy Grail. Christian Bernadac amusingly recounts that one day, he brought Antonin Gadal some pottery shards dating from the Late Bronze Age. Gadal gave him a whole lecture on these 'precious fragments which prove that the Cathars practised their cult in this

[21] This society has nothing to do with the larger group of the Rose + Croix of the A.M.O.R.C., whose very official headquarters are located in the Eure.

enclosure. Having crossed the symbolic and sacred wall, they entered this nave in procession, with an oil lamp or a candle in every niche carved into the walls…'[22]. One could almost be there… Moreover, Bernadac adds, Gadal 'always maintained the same attitude: utter contempt for texts that contradicted his exaltations'[23].

Antonin Gadal seems to have instilled this disregard for the texts in his disciples as well. Christian Bernadac also recounts an anecdote told by his own grandfather, an anecdote concerning Joseph Mandement, who was president of the Tarascon-sur-Ariège Tourist Office (to which Montségur belonged at the time, and which was the rival of the Ussat Tourist Office), himself a committed researcher of the Cathars, but unwilling to give in to delusion. 'One day, Mandement caught a young German red-handed, in Sainte-Eulalie, I believe, as he was producing "fake engravings purporting to be authentically Cathar". Things went badly for the bloke. He was a hair's breadth away from ending up in Sabart Hospital. Mandement landed a straight punch right on his nose. That didn't stop him, once he'd returned home to Germany, from publishing a book on Montségur and the Cathars. His name was Otto Rahn[24]."

This speaks volumes about the calibre of Otto Rahn, whose work inspired so many people on both sides of the Rhine. We must, however, give credit where credit is due: Otto Rahn would have written nothing without Antonin Gadal, who was his mentor and principal source of information. This only serves to reinforce Gadal's responsibility for the dissemination of pseudo-revelations concerning Catharism and the Grail. Christian Bernadac, who nevertheless denounces the deceptions of Antonin Gadal, whom he knew in his youth, cannot help but show a certain leniency towards him, and, to excuse him, describes him as a 'poet'.

This is an insult to all poets. A poet does not claim to do anything other than write poetry. Gadal claimed to be an archaeologist, historian, philosopher and spiritual reformer. I

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[22] Christian Bernadac, *Le mystère Otto Rahn*, p. 34.

[23] *Ibid*., p. 110.

[24] Christian Bernadac, *The Mystery of Otto Rahn*, p. 11.

I never met Antonin Gadal. However, I have read everything he ever wrote. It takes some courage to read him, mind you, for his thinking is so convoluted that one has to read between the lines to make sense of his oddities. Gadal's writings, widely circulated since his death by his loyal disciples, all concern Catharism and the actual presence of the Grail in the Pyrenees, all accompanied by various reflections on heretical or simply esoteric sects scattered throughout the world.

I have studied these texts carefully. *Not a single line is worth retaining*. They are an inextricable jumble of nonsense drawn from who knows where and presented haphazardly, as the pen took its course. The quotations he occasionally offers are truncated or inaccurate. He has never read a single medieval text, let alone a single Celtic text. He does not even know the full *text* of Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, the cornerstone of the Pyrenean interpretation of the Grail. He knows it only through vague fragments quoted by other authors who were already rather careless about the accuracy of their sources. Gadal could at least have read the excellent translation of *Parzival* published by Ernest Tonnelat. But that would have risked undermining his own delusions. Consequently, he mixes episodes attributed to Wolfram with others drawn from different versions of the legend, which he was equally careful not to read: yet there was a fine translation of Chrétien de Troyes's **Perceval** by Lucien Foulet and two acceptable adaptations of **La Quête du Saint-Graal** by Albert Pauphilet and Albert Béguin. But this was probably still too dangerous for his theories. Furthermore, he displays a complete ignorance of the most basic archaeology and cannot distinguish a novelist from a historian. He claims to be reviving a new form of spirituality with dualist tendencies, yet he has never grappled with the fundamental issues of dualism, and he has no understanding of what metaphysics and theology might entail. And his naivety is such that he consistently mistakes bladders for

lanterns and weathered stones as Cathar talismans.

He ought to be classified once and for all as a capable head of the Tourist Office. He succeeded in attracting crowds to his little domain. That alone would be enough to ensure his fame. Unfortunately, Antonin Gadal is and remains the main culprit behind all the wild speculations that have been spoken or written about the Cathars and the Grail over the last fifty years. Was he manipulated, like Abbé Bérenger Saunière in Rennes-le-Château, in particular during the 1930s, by the Theosophical Society or by the mysterious Thule Group? That would not excuse everything, and certainly not his delusion regarding the analogy between his name and that of **Galahad**, the discoverer of the Grail, nor the ridiculous monument erected in Ussat-les-Bains, which is specifically named the 'Galahad Monument'. Without wishing to be unkind, I cannot help but think that Antonin Gadal desecrated the Cathar spirit and the spirit of the Grail by placing both within the reach of groups that were supposedly intellectual and spiritual, but imbued with the most dubious racist ideology.

That said, it is no coincidence that, for the past hundred years or so, there has been such keen interest in the Cathars, in what they represent and in the 'secrets' attributed to them – perhaps a little hastily. It seems that the Cathars have something to tell us: and it is this 'something' that has motivated the research undertaken by historians, philosophers and archaeologists as well as by serious occultists and enlightened prophets. The fact that the Cathars were persecuted makes us feel sympathy for them, at first glance, quite apart from any judgement on their doctrine. In this twilight of the 20th century, we have, if not acquired a sense of true tolerance (we are still far from it), at least accepted the plurality of opinions, and it seems to us that any repression

[25] He turned his name into an anagram of *Gilead*. But clearly, he never realised that the character of Gilead does not appear in the German version of the legend on which he claims to base his ramblings.

in the realm of consciousness constitutes an affront to human dignity.

On the other hand, since the Enlightenment, there has been a constant denunciation of the dictatorship of monolithic churches over the Spirit. The example of the Cathars features prominently among these denunciations. Consequently, without even questioning the underlying reasons for the repression of the Albigensians, people are quick to erect a monument in memory of the martyrs of the Cathar faith, and the sympathy felt for them—as one would feel for all the persecuted—tends to turn into unconditional admiration.

We must not, however, delude ourselves: the Cathars, although they called themselves 'Perfects' or 'Purs', were neither better nor worse than most of their contemporaries. Among them were men and women of exceptional character, whether in terms of faith, charity or intelligence. But, if one looked hard enough, one could just as easily find fools, profiteers and hypocrites. Admittedly, they denounced the depravities of the Roman Church: these were evident in the West during the 12th and 13th centuries. They denounced the hypocrisy of the priests and their immorality. They were undoubtedly right. But the Inquisitors often accused them of things we prefer to keep quiet about: there was a mix of everything among the Cathars, just as there was a mix of everything among their opponents.

Nor should we forget that a society organised in the manner of the 12th and 13th centuries, based on the structures of an active and conquering monarchy and those of a firmly established Church, could not tolerate the Cathar model, any more than the Romans could tolerate the Celtic model, which threatened to undermine their own social structures. The rejection of the world, and therefore of worldly works, advocated and practised by the Cathars, posed a danger to Christian society and threatened to bring it down: it was therefore only natural that the Church and the Capetian monarchy should do everything in their power to destroy what they called a 'heresy', and which was

Quite simply, a different outlook on life. Is it shocking to say so? From a twentieth-century perspective, the Inquisition is an indefensible monstrosity. In the context of the thirteenth century, however, it was entirely justified, and the only ones who protested vehemently against it were precisely those who risked falling into its clutches.

Might we ourselves be potential 'clients' of an Inquisition ever ready to rise anew from the still-glowing embers of a Church that is, nevertheless, weakened, or of any other church claiming to hold the sole and binding Truth? There is some truth in that. In fact, *heresy appeals to us* because we feel, to a greater or lesser extent, like heretics. That is why we feel such sympathy for the victims of the pyres. But the tears we shed for them are crocodile tears. We are only interested in them because they represent our unconscious tendencies: to plunge, as Baudelaire said, into the depths of the unknown *to find something new there*. But Baudelaire was careful to specify: 'Hell or Heaven, what does it matter!' The anxiety of this century, the metaphysical anguish that has gripped us ever since physicists discovered they do not know what matter is, the collapse of traditional values we believed to be eternal, the more or less conscious millenarianism that grips us at the dawn of the year 2000—all this makes us feel very close to heretics of all stripes. Having recognised a void within ourselves—a void that the official churches, whether religious or secular, have failed to prevent—we are trying to discover the cause of this void, and above all we are attempting to fill it. And since we feel that, throughout history, men and women have been eliminated because they offered different solutions, it is to them that we turn for help: they, perhaps, know something that has been, if not forgotten, at least scorned or concealed.

Every era attempts to rediscover the past. Every era engages in a reinterpretation of tradition. This is how human progress has been achieved. We believe we have a duty

overlook nothing of the past, and therefore to examine carefully everything that has been excluded from mainstream thinking. This is the case with Catharism. And it is all the more exciting given that the Cathars have a reputation, justified or not, for having possessed secrets. Lost secrets always capture the imagination of men, who are all, to a greater or lesser extent, treasure hunters. Or knights setting out on a quest for the Holy Grail.

It is therefore hardly surprising to note that our contemporaries' interest in the Cathar phenomenon is matched by an equally fervent interest in all things relating to the mysterious 'Holy' Grail, especially since Wagner brought to the world the spellbinding harmony and haunting rhythms that accompany Parzival's triumph. Parzival the 'Pure', the 'Perfect', who, from a simple, somewhat naïve believer, became the King of the Grail, after straying for a moment into Klingsor's enchanted gardens, where the Flower Maidens spread scents too sweet not to have a sulphurous aftertaste… There is much here to dream about, and I fully understand those who go in search of the Grail at Montségur, attempting to rediscover the winding path that leads to the secret castle of which Montségur is but the visible face. For just as there is, in Cathar mythology, an earthly Christ, husband or lover of Mary Magdalene, so too is there a heavenly Christ, pure among the pure, the archetype of the radiant Angel, whose light Parzival-Perceval glimpses rising from the Grail. But Perceval asked no questions during his visit to Montsalvage-Corbénic, when he saw the mysterious procession with the bleeding spear, the silver cup and the 'chalice' held by a most beautiful young girl. Perceval is the very embodiment of the man asleep in the diabolical snares of matter, who no longer knows that he is an Angel. It will take another Angel, this one of feminine appearance, to reveal to him that he has failed. And this other Angel goes by various names: in the Welsh text of the legend, she is the Empress of Many Faces; elsewhere, she is the hideous Lady of the Mule, or Kundry the 'Witch'. But Perceval did not know that she was *also* Melisande.

In all the texts of the Grail legend, we are warned that it is difficult to find the castle where the wounded king keeps the Mysterious Vessel. Sometimes we walk right past this castle without seeing it, blinded as we are by the illusions cast by Satan or his favourite enchanter, whatever his name may be (except for Merlin, who is quite different, and over whom the devil has no hold). Sometimes reality appears so obvious, so apparent, so luminous, that it is impossible to see it. Many curious souls lose their way on the Tabe massif or in the caves of Ussat. Many enthusiasts seek the hidden path leading to the cave of Mary Magdalene. This is proof that many are interested in something that is alive, something that is rooted in this arid land. One does not waste time searching for ghosts, and if there are ghosts, they are simply a reflection of what lies *elsewhere*.

The problem is avoiding dead-end paths. In a country steeped in history, memory is not lost: it permeates the landscape, giving it a certain hue and a distinctive scent. But memory is untrustworthy. It is like the fairies who lie in wait for travellers and subject them to trials before deciding whether to show them the way forward or to trap them in some snare.

In these times of prophecy, when we are constantly told that the 21st century will be mystical or it will not be at all, prophets are to be found at every turn. The trouble is that they speak a language incomprehensible to ordinary people, and when, by chance, they make themselves understood to those they meet, one realises that their predictions are contradictory.

Such is the game.

In Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, the young hero, after his failed visit to Montsalvage, is 'initiated' by the hermit Trévrizent. Among other things, Trévrizent tells him that in days of old the Grail was guarded 'by angels who were neither good nor evil'. But then Trévrizent tells him that he lied and that it is not true. It is a specific admission, proving

that *the initiator* does not necessarily show the way forward: he merely offers a few snippets of what needs to be known, and mixes truths with lies. If the newly chosen one is worthy of the role, he will find his way and distinguish truth from falsehood. For an initiator can never take the place of the initiate: it is up to the latter to complete the quest.

Before delving into the Cathar enigma, it is wise to bear in mind the traps set by initiators, or those who claim to be such. Firstly, the true initiator never claims to be what he is. In truth, he is like the Castle of the Grail: one passes by him without realising he is there. Only a few will recognise him. And then, only a few more—even rarer still—will see through the initiator's lies. That is the game.

Amidst the cacophony of voices extolling the Grail and the Cathars, who can possibly distinguish truth from falsehood? There is no shortage of accounts. Everyone claims to hold the truth. We must not be taken in by this. The secret of the Cathars, the Cathars' 'Treasure', the 'Grail' – these are merely words into which one can read whatever one wishes. It is like the traditional Spanish inns: one finds there only what one has brought with one. This is certainly true of the quest for the Cathars in these significant sites: Montségur, the upper Ariège valley and the Razès. After all, what if Montségur were merely a prism through which all the rays of human intelligence converge? This hypothesis would at least have the merit of making it a sort of solar temple.

There is, however, something else: in folk legends, whenever the Devil builds something—a bridge, for example—his work remains unfinished. Oh! There is very little missing, sometimes just a single stone; but that is enough for the whole bridge to collapse. This is because the bridge is the Devil's work, and the Devil, even if one is a radical dualist, is not God. As for the missing stone, only God can place it in the right spot.

In Chrétien de Troyes' **Perceval** —a text that the contemplatives of Montségur are all too prone to overlook, dazzled as they are by Wolfram von Eschenbach—the passage corresponding to the episode of the hermit Trévrizent is far more restrained, and in no way burdened by philosophical speculation. Let us recall that this version predates Wolfram's by a considerable margin, and that it adheres more closely to the archetype of the legend. Now, in this episode, Chrétien tells us that the hermit 'whispered a prayer into Perceval's ear and repeated it to him until he knew it by heart. Many names of God were included in it; among them were the greatest, those which no human mouth must utter, except at the risk of death. Therefore, when he had taught it to him, he forbade him to say it, unless it were to escape from a very great **danger26''**.

Now that is a fine tale. And Perceval is now in possession of a prayer that enables him to escape death. He has thus attained a form of near-immortality. Chrétien de Troyes, who did not complete his work—apparently by choice—does not show us Perceval as King of the Grail, and we do not know whether it was his intention to take the story that far. But what of this secret and formidable prayer concerning the names of God? It brings to mind the Hebrew tradition concerning Lilith who, pursued by the Angels of God because she abandoned Adam, refuses to obey the commands of the Eternal One, *because she knows the ineffable name of God*. Despite the Christian vocabulary employed by the author, it is not certain that this episode is of exemplary orthodoxy.

This secret prayer is, in a way, the missing link in the bridge built by the Devil. It is likely that the Cathars were on the verge of discovering the ineffable names of God. Perhaps they even knew them. But did they pass on this secret? Did they leave it somewhere—at Montségur, at Quéribus, in the cave at Lombrives, at the castle of Montréal-de-Sos, at Bugarach, at Rennes-le-Château? Unless it was

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26 Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval*, trans. Lucien Foulez, Paris, Stock, 1947, p. 153.

in Rennes-les-Bains, Granès or Usson Castle? Or perhaps at Puivert Castle, where there are pictorial representations of the Arthurian legends? How can we know, except through the Hermit?

II CATHARISM

AND DRUIDISM

On the 700th anniversary of the burning at the stake at Montségur, that is to say 16 March 1944, at the height of the German occupation, Joseph Mandement, president of the Tarascon-sur-Ariège Tourist Office, to which Montségur then belonged, unveiled, in the company of a few friends, a small memorial stone in honour of Maurice Magre, who died in 1939, the first president of the Friends of Montségur association. This memorial was to be erected on the slopes of *the hill*. So, after seeking permission from the relevant authorities to erect the memorial and after notifying the German occupation authorities of their gathering, Joseph Mandement and just six friends found themselves at Montségur. We know the names of the six: Antonin Gadal, Paul Salette, René Clastres, Maurice Roques, Paul Philip and the writer Joseph Delteil. Their small ceremony took place without incident, and there was nothing to report except that Montségur was flown over by a small German aircraft *which traced a Celtic cross in the sky using white smoke.*

The Celts at Montségur, and thanks to a German aeroplane! It's better than a legend, especially as the event has been confirmed by the accounts of those who were there. Unfortunately, their accounts differ as to how the aeroplane's movements should be interpreted. Here is what Paul Philip, who was then chairman of the Tarascon tourist office, had to say: 'Around midday, we saw this small aeroplane trace a circle of white smoke that gradually thinned out and

‘We then went back and drew two very rough diameters. We concluded that he had intended to draw a Celtic cross.’ It sounds too good to be true. The nationalist writer hiding behind the pseudonym Saint-Loup has written some very fine things on the subject, embellishing the story merrily—and all the more easily for not having been there himself: but what would one not do to glorify German-Celtic friendship? What a fine gift the Germans had given to the Gauls of Montségur! It must nevertheless be noted that, since then, the Celtic cross—which is, moreover, highly stylised—has taken on an unfortunate connotation and has been used for philosophical and political ends that the Celts had scarcely foreseen and which are, in any case, utterly contrary to the Celtic mindset.

But Joseph Delteil’s account does not agree:

‘So, on the morning of 16 March 1944, a small propeller plane came circling over the ruins of Montségur Castle, where we had gathered, our bodies present but our minds elsewhere, our thoughts scattered, as if in a dream, on this day commemorating 16 March 1244. This small aeroplane, which, as was later reported, was carrying Rosenberg (the theoretical ideologue of the National Socialist Party), circled for a few moments, but I must testify that I did not see a cross within a circle, as some have claimed or written.”[27] Delteil is categorical: he did not see a Celtic cross. Philip was vague: he saw something, and it was only after discussing it that the group concluded it was a Celtic cross.

Naturally, Antonin Gadal was among the group. One can be certain that the undeniable – and perfectly normal – presence of a small German reconnaissance aircraft was distorted by him to such an extent that it became a matter of state requiring the visit of a high-ranking Nazi official greeting his Gallic – Aryan – cousins with a smoke trail evoking the Celtic cross.

[27] Ch. Bernadac, *Le mystère Otto Rahn*, pp. 260–261.

All this is grotesque in itself, but also intolerable, because it completely distorts historical truth and establishes – rather unfortunately in this instance – a close, intimate connection between the Cathars, the Druids, the Grail and Nazism. This was not the first time the Druids had been brought into the debate. Gadal saw them everywhere, and of course as predecessors of the Cathars. Above all, identifying the Grail Castle as Montségur could only throw wide open the doors to Celticism. Druids had to be found at all costs in Montségur, Ussat and Rennes-le-Château.

And they were found.

That is why it is important to set the record straight. Not that there were no Druids in this region during the time it was inhabited by Gallic peoples—the Volques, Tectosages or Rhedones: the opposite would be rather surprising, and the region, being very remote, with its forests and mountain peaks, lent itself magnificently to Druidic worship. But here's the thing: the Druids left even fewer visible traces than the Cathars, which is saying something, and certainly not the megalithic monuments, which predate the Druids by at least two millennia. If these Druids left any record of their presence, it is not in writings – since they rejected the use of writing – but in a few archaeological artefacts and in the names of certain places. That is all.

If there are any links between the Celts and the Cathars, they can only lie on another level: that of doctrine, of a system of thought, and, of course, of the religious tradition that forms the backbone of any ancient civilisation. However, on this level, those prone to hasty generalisations are likely to be disappointed: it is not a mere gulf that separates the Celts and the Cathars, but one of those fabulous chasms of incalculable depth that abound in the Pyrenees, near Montségur.

Indeed, from an ontological perspective, Cathar dualism is fundamentally opposed to Celtic monism. As far as we can tell, Druidic doctrine emphasises 'the

the ‘dark and profound unity’ that exists between beings and things, between creatures and the Creator, *between matter and spirit.* It is not even the famous phrase from the Emerald Tablet: ‘As above, so below.’ It is a more direct formulation in which the comparative element disappears in favour of identification: ‘What is above is what is below.’

Consequently, for the Celts, this visible, apparent world—the world of the living—is exactly the same as the Otherworld, the realm of the gods, heroes and the dead. During the festival of *Samhain*, on 1 November – the great Celtic festival, the New Year, later adopted by Christians and becoming All Saints’ Day, the day of the Communion of Saints (living and dead alike) – the world of the living could communicate – symbolically – with the world *beyond*. One could pass from one world to the other, thus bearing witness to this essential unity of the visible and the invisible. And earthly society, guided by the druid allied with the king, must conform very closely to the image of *the* world *beyond*, that of the divine.

Under these circumstances, this implies a diametrically opposed view of the material world. Being is not confined within matter: it flourishes within matter because the world is in a state of perpetual becoming. This rules out any notion of a fall, any notion of imprisonment, any notion of a Satan—a spirit of evil—who might have created an imperfect world to caricature the work of the God of Light. Satan is not Celtic: he is Persian. And if Christians gave him the appearance and attributes of the Gallic god Cernunnos, the horned god, it is because they could not rid themselves of this troublesome figure embodying strength and fertility.

And if there is no Satan, then there is no problem of Evil. The Celts do not recognise metaphysical Evil: Evil is quite simply the imperfection of beings, a normal imperfection within a process of perpetual evolution: it is the Perfect, that is to say *the Accomplished*, which equates to nothingness. Consequently

consequently, Evil in all its forms—injustice, violence, suffering, illness—is merely a series of necessary setbacks on the path to reaching a higher stage. For the absence of a principle of Evil does not lead to laxity: quite the contrary, the example of the heroes of Celtic mythology, and later the great saints of early Celtic Christianity, shows us human existence as a constant striving of the being towards something higher. Thus, there is no need to explain the world through the malevolent creation of the fallen angel, nor the coming of a messiah showing the way back to the kingdom of Light. If the Celts converted readily to Christianity, it was because the resurrection of Jesus proved to them that their doctrine of rebirth in another world was sound.

For this is a rebirth into another world, and by no means a reincarnation in the Cathar sense of the term. Despite whatever commentators—who have never verified their claims against an authentic Celtic text—may have concocted, the doctrine of the transmigration of souls is entirely unknown to the Druids and the mythological tradition of the Celts. 'Death is the middle of a long life,' the Latin poet Lucan had a Druid say. This is one of the few points the Cathars and the Celts have in common: neither group fears death. Because they know there is an *afterlife*, even if that *afterlife* is not conceived in the same way. But the Celts, rather than viewing life as a punishment, regard it as the catalyst for **individual** evolution[28].

This has obvious social implications. For the Cathars, since the world, with its structures and societies, is a diabolical creation, the best possible attitude is one of contempt for this world, austerity, self-restraint, and the rejection of all material pleasure. None of this is found among the Celts, where

[28] On the religious thought of the Celts, their metaphysical conceptions and their morality, see J. Markale, *Le Druidisme*, Paris, Payot, 1985. On the transition from Druidism to Christianity and the distinctive attitude observed in the early Christian communities of Ireland and Britain, see J. Markale, *Celtic Christianity*, Paris, Imago, 1984.

On the contrary, we see an exaltation of this world, *which is divine* in all its manifestations and is regarded as an instrument of perfection. At that point, morality becomes merely a set of rules that can help guide one towards the best possible solution. Good is everything, and evil is merely an imperfect good, as is the case in Orthodox Christianity, and indeed at the very heart of Augustinian thought. It is a rejection of any Manichaean attitude: there is neither good nor evil, neither Heaven nor Hell, neither Night nor Day, neither Life nor Death: there is only one reality, but this reality has many facets.

The implications are no less evident when it comes to Nature. For the Cathars, Nature is evil, fundamentally tainted by every kind of flaw. It is not because they are vegetarians that the Cathars respect Nature. They simply choose to ignore it. On the contrary, in Druidic doctrine, we see a sublimation of Nature, since it, too, is a divine manifestation. It is within the context of Nature that one communicates with God, because there, nothing stands in the way of absolute transcendence. And this cannot be achieved without respect for Nature, without an attitude that might be described as ecological.

But Nature is not just mountains, landscapes, rivers, forests and little birds. It is also the human being in their most physical form. The flesh is not cursed: it is exalted just as much as the Spirit, since, ultimately, body and soul are merely two sides of the same reality. To improve the body is to improve the Spirit, and in any case, as with the Greeks, one cannot exist without the other. Consequently, there are no sexual taboos, no guilt. Taboos – which exist in all religious systems – are of a magical nature and refer to a holistic view of the subtle relationships between the individual and their environment, without any moral connotation.

It is therefore very difficult, unless one were to completely imagine a Druidic system – which some have not hesitated to do

– to draw parallels between the radical or moderate dualism of the Cathars and the complete monism of the Celts. It is only in a few minor details that a certain similarity can be observed. The most significant concerns the conception of Jesus: we know that the Cathars believed that Mary had been impregnated through her ear. This allowed them to eliminate any sexual relationship on the part of the Virgin Mary, whilst at the same time remaining consistent with orthodox doctrine: it is the Holy Spirit who is the father of Jesus, and symbolically, this Holy Spirit is represented in the form of a dove, a dove that seems to have played a role in the 'visual arts', so to speak, of the Cathars, before being adopted by the Huguenots.

However, we should not limit ourselves to the conventional interpretation, which is valid in Catharism and Orthodox Christianity: this is a literal interpretation and serves, in fact, only to establish a meaningful image. It serves to eliminate the *sin* inherent in all procreation. The dove of the Holy Spirit is very convenient, and if it had not existed, it would have had to be invented. But it existed long before, if only in the form of the dove that brought Noah an olive branch. A symbol of peace, they say. It has become a symbol of peace, for in the text of *Genesis*, and always taken at face value, it is rather a symbol of rebirth, of regeneration. But if one considers that the text is a reworking of a mythological episode dating well before the time of its writing (like everything concerning the Flood, for that matter), the judgement must be revised.

It is well known that Noah and his ark, containing a pair of every living species and floating upon the waters, are a clearly historicised and rationalised representation of a primitive, indeed primordial, goddess, whose name was probably Nuah. If we consider the myth in its very essence, it is significant: the goddess Nuah floats upon the primordial waters. She is a virgin, of course. However, at a certain point, a dove appears, holding a twig in its beak and setting down that twig

on the ark. There is no need to resort to psychoanalysis to understand the meaning of this episode: it concerns the conception of the virgin goddess, and a new humanity will be born of this union. And the dove does indeed represent the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God. But how does it manifest itself? Through the word, of course, through *the Word*. The Gospel of Saint John, so highly esteemed by the Cathars, says no other thing: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (1:1–2).' And again: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (1:14).' ' The Word thus appears as the instrument of creation, or more precisely as the absolute and inscrutable God considered in his function as creator. God, in himself, is undifferentiated: for the human mind to conceive of him, he must be presented in a form that conveys his action. Hence the image of the dove.

And if the dove represents the Holy Spirit—and thus the Word, the divine Word—then the act of conception thus brought about can only take place *through the ear*. This symbol is not so much used to eliminate the sexual aspect of creation as it is to signify something far more important: the omnipotence of the Word. The Cathar myth of the Virgin Mary's conception through the ear constitutes a variation on the orthodox episode of the Annunciation by the Angel who appears to Mary, but its significance is far greater: it is not an Angel who acts, but God himself as the Word.

This concept is found in Druidism, essentially through the role assigned to the Word. The Druids forbade the use of Scripture for various reasons, and they favoured the Word. It is through the Word that a Druid can act, upon both Spirit and Matter, since they are one and the same. The Druid can transform the world through incantation, and thus through his word. And the Druid, from the Celtic perspective, is by nature the manifested God, for all the gods of the Celts are Druids and all Druids are gods—that is to say, functional manifestations of a single divinity unknown outside of its action. We know, thanks to a passage from the

Caesar notes that a Gallic priest bore the title of *gutuater*. The passage is unclear and suggests that the writer, in this case Hirtius, Caesar's lieutenant, interpreted the term as a proper name, whereas it is in fact a common noun attested in inscriptions. But the *gutuater* is the 'Father of the Word', and the name derives from the word *guth*, 'voice, word', which is found in the term used in Ireland to denote the incantation par excellence, the *geis*, a formidable process that gives the Word absolute creative power.

Yet the Word held a special place among the Cathars. Apart from a few very simple rites, such as the *consolamentum*, the—let us say—priestly activity (though this is a misnomer, since the Cathars had no priests) of the Perfects manifested itself above all through preaching. The Cathars wrote little. But they spoke, and they left behind a legacy as passionate and remarkably skilled orators. It was through the Word that they converted the Occitans to their faith and transmitted their doctrine. It was through the Word that they officiated, and in this they were perfectly in accord with the Gospel of Saint John, to which they constantly referred: the authentic Cathar, the pure among the pure, is an Angel who manifests the voice of God and spreads it around him for the benefit of those who have not yet reached a sufficient level to hear God speak to them directly. The Virgin Mary, for her part, had reached this stage: she heard God, hence her special position and the beginning of all the speculations about her nature which were to lead, later on, among Catholics, to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. But how many humans still have their ears closed?

Here, then, is a point—and a very important one at that—where the Cathars and the Druids converge: the importance of the Word, which is the manifestation of God in His creative or re-creative functions. For let us not forget that Satan usurped this power of creation to make the world. Satan, too, possesses the art of the Word. But something is missing, and his creation can only be a caricature. It is therefore up to God to re-create the world. This is even the myth of the Flood,

but it has been historicised and relegated to the past, whereas it concerns the future.

There is also another point of convergence between Druidic doctrine and the symbolic mythology of the Cathars: that concerning the Light. The God of the Cathars, like that of the Manicheans, and above all like that of the Zoroastrians, is the king of the Kingdom of Light. The primordial god is the god of Light. We find this in the Gospel of Saint John: 'In him (the Word) was life, and the life was the Light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (1:4–5).' And John takes the opportunity to affirm that he was sent by God as a Witness to this Light, then he adds: "This light was the true light, which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. It was in the world, and the world was made through it, and the world did not know it (1:9–10)." If we understand correctly, there is an identification of the Light and the Word.

The issue is subtle, to say the least, and to understand it, it is essential to revisit the theory of Creation as formulated by Cathares early 13th century.

'Whilst Catholic theologians usually contrast the act of "making" (*facere*) – which means producing something from something else – with that of "creating" (*creare*), which properly means "making something out of nothing" (*ex nihilo*), the Cathars see no difference between *facere* and *creare*. The two terms are generally regarded as synonymous. God is *creator sive factor*, with 'to create' or 'to make' always meaning to create from a prior, pre-existing **substance"[29]**. This conception is difficult to comprehend within the framework of traditional logic based on the principle of the excluded middle: if A is not non-A, then non-A is not A, and there can be no identification between what is positive and what is not.

Yet the Cathars assert the eternal existence of *something* that might be called *a substance*, which is nothing but nothingness

[29] René Nelli, *Le phénomène cathare*, Toulouse, Privat, 1964, p. 27.

absolute until it is set in motion by a creator, who is also a shaper. At this point in their argument, the Cathars are compelled to borrow from the Mazdeans the image of the Light, eternal and incorruptible, from which all that exists proceeds. The reference is obvious, since emphasis is placed on the Kingdom of Light from which the fallen Angels, that is to say human beings, originated. Thus, it is as though the original Light had spread out from itself, creating and shaping forms which, whilst possessing their own distinct characteristics, necessarily retain a fragment of the luminous energy that brought them into being. One could then compare this Cathar theory of Creation with the highly scientific theory of the initial explosion from which the universe originated. The

The 'hundred thousand suns' of the nuclear explosion have become the stuff of terrifying imagery, whose reality cannot conceal its mythological connotations. In this gigantic explosion, the particles scattered throughout space were not, therefore, created *ex nihilo*, since they belonged to the primordial mass—that potential Light awaiting manifestation. Thus, among the Cathars, we find a return to the Gnostic theory of emanation. Creation, according to the Cathar Jean de Lugio, is inseparable from the Creator, just as the sun's rays are inseparable from the sun: creatures *emanate* from the primordial Light.

The consequences of this theory are evident in the Cathars' eschatological vision, as well as in their morality and their vocabulary, which abounds with references to light and whiteness. Were there repercussions on worship, particularly on a so-called solar cult? This is less certain: the Cathars were, after all, not Mazdeans. On the other hand, their mythology is solar, and this is what links them to the Celtic tradition.

But here again, one must be very cautious and put things in their proper perspective. In our time, there are far too many people who claim to be druids and who conduct ceremonies in honour of the sun, both at the solstices and at the

equinoxes. They even turn Midsummer's Day into a great Celtic festival dating back to time immemorial. 'Time immemorial' is the right phrase: the Midsummer Bonfires are a legacy of the ancient civilisations that preceded the Celts on the European continent, but they have absolutely nothing to do with the Celts. In no document concerning the Celts can one find any reference to a solar festival that would have been celebrated at the solstice. Celtic festivals are well known: they always take place forty days after a solstice or equinox, at the beginning of November, February, May and August. Monuments that might be classified as *solar*, such as the circular temple at Stonehenge or the megalithic alignments at Carnac, belong to a civilisation that predates the arrival of the Celts by a considerable margin. It is nonetheless regrettable that people who claim to be druids should be unaware of such a historical reality, and this alone should cast doubt on their so-called druidic lineage. In fact, in the cult, as in Celtic mythology, everything relating to the sun appears to be a legacy of an earlier civilisation, more or less integrated by the Celts.

For there are solar elements in the Celtic tradition, but they are very subtle and of an ontological nature. Admittedly, there is a god whom Caesar compares to the Greco-Roman Apollo. But Caesar does not speak of him as a sun god: he is a healing deity, a deity of springs, which is, incidentally, consistent with the Greeks' view of him. However, this Celtic Apollo bears, in Gaul and Britain, characteristic epithets: Grannus and Belenus. Belenus (Belenos) is easy to understand: it means 'shining'. As for Grannus, it shares the same root as the Gaelic word *grian*, meaning 'sun'. It is, moreover, highly likely that Belenos features in the place-names of Cathar country, in the form of Bel (as in Belesta), this term being often confused with the adjective which means
'beautiful', and which is not of Latin origin. But the name Grannus is clearly recognisable in the village of Granès, near

Rennes-le-Château. In reality, the deity's solar function, its *radiance*, its *emanating* nature, are more evident in a female figure, an ancient Sun Goddess whose features, somewhat altered, have become those of a well-known legendary heroine, the fair-haired Iseult.

Belenos does indeed have a sort of female counterpart in Gaul, Belisama, whose name (which is that of the town of Bellême, in the Orne) is a superlative meaning 'very brilliant'. She is known from several inscriptions from the Gallo-Roman period, in particular on a stone found at Saint-Lizier, in the Ariège, which equates her with the Latin Minerva. But in Britain, this same Minerva is identified as the goddess Sul, whose name leaves no room for doubt: she is a sun goddess. Let us not forget that in Celtic and Germanic languages, the sun is feminine and the moon masculine, which often distorts interpretations of the great legends. Thus, Siegfried, the central figure of *the Nibelungen*, is not a solar hero, but a 'moon-man', and it is the Valkyrie Brunhild, or Sirgdryfa, depicted as a prisoner in a citadel surrounded by flames, who is the **sun-woman**.[30] The same applies to Iseult.

The prototype for the character of Iseult is in fact an Irish heroine named Grainné. It is not difficult to recognise the Gaelic word *grian* in this name: and in the legend, Grainné, wife of King Finn, who has fallen in love with the handsome Diarmaid – who is not in love with her – compels him, by means of the formidable *geis*, a sacred and magical incantation, to follow her and love her, so that he can no longer do without her. Now, if one analyses the legend of Tristan and Iseult, one arrives at the same plot: at the beginning, Tristan is not in love with Iseult; it is she who compels him to love her, by virtue of the love potion, the equivalent of *the geis*, and this to such an extent that Tristan can no longer do without Iseult. We are told, moreover, in the

[30] See J. Markale, *Siegfried, or The Rhine Gold*, Paris, Retz, 1984.

A 13th-century prose novel states that Tristan would have died had he not had physical contact with Iseult at least once a month. The symbolism is easy to grasp: Iseult, the sun, gives life and warmth to Tristan, the moon-man. Every twenty-eight days, the moon-man loses his strength and vanishes. This is the moment of the Black Moon: the sun no longer illuminates the moon, and this moon is tantamount to nothingness, melting away, dissolving into eternal night. But Isolde, through the sexual act, restores Tristan's strength and vitality: the moon-man slowly emerges from the night to traverse the heavens. But the legend of Tristan ends tragically: Isolde arrives too late to heal his wound. In reality, she arrives too late to impart her energy to him, and Tristan, deprived of this energy, can no longer hold on to life.

It might be an exaggeration to claim that the legend of Tristan and Iseult is the expression of a Cathar myth. Its origins appear to be distinctly Irish and Celtic, even if certain parallels can be drawn with a Persian tradition. But there is undoubtedly a connection, and the Occitan troubadours, who were well acquainted with Catharism, knew the story of Tristan well and bore witness to it. For it is *in the spirit* that the link exists, through solar symbolism. One need only interpret the legend in the light of Cathar doctrine to be convinced of this, and recall that among all Indo-European peoples, there was the image of a female deity of Light, the famous Scythian Diana spoken of by the Greeks, who subsequently became 'lunar' during the reversal of values and the introduction of **patriarchal** society[31]. Originally, it is likely that the Iranians' Ahura-Mazda was a luminous entity embodied in the form of a female goddess.

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[31] This reversal of values is evident in Greece in the story of the slaying of the serpent Python (the earth-bound mother goddess) by Apollo (the celestial male god), who, incidentally, takes this opportunity to appropriate the solar aspect of Diana-Artemis, regarded as his twin sister, and relegates her to a lunar role. See J. Markale, *La Femme celte*, Paris, Payot, 8th ed., 1985.

Thus, Iseult-la-Blonde is the Primordial Light, that of the original Paradise. Following their rebellion, the Angels became incarnated in Matter. They feel imprisoned and yearn, albeit confusedly, to return to the realm of Light. But, blinded by Satan's traps, they do not know the path that leads there. Moreover, Satan himself stands in their way (this is the etymological meaning of the word 'devil'), and it is fatal to encounter him when one sets out in search of the Sun. In the legend, this is Morholt, a sort of monster or giant, whose true significance is no longer fully understood and who resembles the Fomorians of Irish tradition. This Morholt is a devourer: he comes to demand a tribute of young men and women, which means that Satan swallows up these creatures into his hell to deprive them of the Light forever. Tristan fights him and kills him. In a first step, the fallen angel Tristan, who vaguely remembers his belonging to the world of Light, eliminates the obstacle. The way is now clear, but he still does not know where to go, all the more so as his struggle against Satan has weakened him: he is wounded with an incurable injury. He therefore sets off in a boat, *at random*, sailing upon the sea, that is to say, upon the primordial waters that separate the world of appearances from the world of realities.

It is then that he arrives in Ireland, the Otherworld, where Iseult is to be found. She heals him. Enamoured of Tristan, Iseult waits for him to declare his love. But Tristan has not recognised in Iseult what he was vaguely seeking. He takes no action. He returns, and, still not understanding what is happening, he wants to have Iseult married to his uncle Mark. To do so, he must fight another manifestation of Satan, the great Crested Serpent of Ireland, a monster that devours its victims. Tristan is victorious, but once again wounded, poisoned by the monster's breath. A second time, he is healed by Iseult, who thus affirms the dual role of the archaic sun goddess, radiant and healing. But Tristan still has not recognised the one he seeks. So it is Iseult who takes action: on the

On board the ship, she arranges for her maid to mix up the goblets, and, together with Tristan, she drinks the 'herbal wine', the love potion – in reality a drink of knowledge, of the sort so common in Celtic tradition, which the French writers of the legend used to absolve Tristan and Isolde's affair of any guilt. From then on, Tristan, having recognised in Isolde the sole dispenser of the Light, can no longer live without her, or without her radiance. The human soul, which remembers its belonging to the divine world, which becomes aware that it is an angel, can no longer turn back. The Cathar who has become Perfect can never again renounce his rediscovered angelic nature.

To interpret the legend of Tristan in this way is not to claim that it is a Cathar creation. It contains mythological elements that illustrate the Cathar thesis, that is all. And it is surely because it could take on this meaning that the legend enjoyed such success in the 12th and 13th centuries. What is remarkable about fables is that they can serve as a vehicle for numerous religious or metaphysical themes: one need only alter a few details whilst retaining the original plot.

For beyond illustrating the Perfect One's attitude towards the God of Light, the love between Tristan and Iseult can also be understood as a figurative expression of the theory of emanation. The Moon is nothing without the Sun; the Moon's light emanates from the Sun, since the Moon is only visibly apparent when the Sun's rays strike it. Tristan, the moon-man, truly exists only through his contact with the radiant Iseult: ultimately, Tristan is a pure emanation of Iseult. And where there is emanation, there is a permanent bond between the emanator and the emanated. The Cathars often emphasised this bond, without which no hope would be granted to the fallen and imprisoned Angels. But as it was impossible to express this theory of emanation without resorting to imagery, the legend of Tristan proved most apt. And the love story further masked the heretical content of the message. In the

same vein, the troubadours who sang of the Ideal Woman, Perfection embodied by the Lady, that is to say the *domina*, the "mistress", employed the same subterfuge. It has been said too often that the troubadours referred to the Cathar Church in the guise of the Lady. This is not always accurate. Indeed, there is no Cathar Church; there are only Cathar groups which, in order to survive, organise themselves and establish a hierarchy, but without any intention of forming a monolithic bloc in the image of the Roman Church. If she is Cathar, the Lady of the troubadours is none other than the personification of the Primordial Light to which every believer must pay exclusive and passionate worship. Hence the strangely erotic quality discernible in the *Fine Amor*. But let us make no mistake. *Fine Amor* is not an invention of the Cathars: they merely used it, in exactly the same way as they used the terms *dioceses*, *bishops* and *deacons*.

But this exaltation of the Light, among both the Cathars and the Celts, raises the question of dualism itself. Whatever their stance—whether radical or moderate—the Cathars were always at a loss as to what status to attribute to Satan. To say the least, this status is never described in the same terms across the various schools of thought: at times he is a son of God on a par with Jesus; at times he is a rebellious angel, yet a creature subject to God; he is also the embodiment of a principle coexisting with the principle of Good, of which God himself is the embodiment.

One explanation for the fall of the angels seems particularly ambiguous: if the angels rebelled, if they fell and if they took on a demonic or human form, it is, as René Nelli points out, because, 'By losing themselves, they *merely transformed themselves into what they already were*.' This is indeed surprising in the case of dualists: one really gets the impression that Evil—that is, Satan—is contained within the Whole, since the Angels merely took on, in the open, a form that was already potentially contained within them.

Does this mean that the Cathars were false dualists and that their doctrine aimed to prove, at least for those who could follow the reasoning through to its conclusion, that everything ultimately amounted to a dark and profound unity? In short, was it a matter of claiming that Satan is in God? Or must we understand that the God of Light, the primordial God, contains *both Good and Evil*?

It might be said that Catholic theology is not far removed from this conclusion. But it saves the whole edifice through the intervention of free will. If God has granted freedom to his creatures, the fall of the angels and Adam's original sin are the consequence of that freedom; and, under these circumstances, God is not both Good and Evil: he leaves the choice to us. Of course, Saint Augustine will temper the scope of this choice by subjecting it to divine grace, the only force capable of guiding and showing the way forward, but the emphasis is nonetheless placed on individual responsibility. Yet the Cathars reject free will. In fact, there is no choice. 'For a doctrine which taught that the good are eternally with the true God and the wicked with the Devil, this establishment of celestial hierarchies absolutely excluded freedom' (René Nelli).

So the evil angels were created evil from all eternity. However, based on the theory of emanation, which posited a hierarchy ranging from the least negated (Jesus) to absolute nothingness (Satan), certain Cathar theologians came to claim that Satan himself would be saved at the end of time, for the end of time can only come when there are no more souls to be saved. Thus, there is no longer an eternal hell, nor any evil existing outside of God. God is both Good and Evil, but these, in their absolute state, do not constitute an antagonism. It is when creation brings about relativity that Good and Evil, themselves relativised and separated, clash in a struggle that will only end with the end of the relative and the return to the Absolute.

A heretical position that no Catholic theologian has dared to uphold. The Cathar s themselves have taken much of

precautions to say it without really saying it. It is clear that the Believers, and even some of the Perfect Ones, oversimplified the issue and were content with the traditional image of Satan as the creator of matter, surrounded by countless demons, who were, incidentally, clad in the same finery as in Catholic depictions. Only the theorists arrived at this view of things. But this view is unquestionably *monistic*, and is every bit as comprehensive as the integral monism professed by the Druids.

So, convergence? Yes, but only upon deeper analysis. In fact, Cathar doctrine is merely an attempt to explain human misery and the imperfection of the world. If we take the symbol of the sunlight spreading through space, emanating from a central point, we can conclude that evil is nothing other than the consequence of moving away from that central point. Evil is therefore an imperfection, a lesser imbuing of the Light. We must therefore not speak of negation, nor define Satan as a negator: Evil would be summed up not as the absence of Good, *but as the absence of primordial Light*.

In this respect, Cathar doctrine appears to be close to the Druidic conception, for the Celts believed that the world is a perpetual process of becoming in which there can be neither Good nor Evil, but only movements that are not always in harmony with one another; and that beings, as participants in this ongoing creation, must bring it to perfection—that is to say, to its fulfilment. Then, there will be no more internal contradictions. But there will be nothing left: the world exists only through the effort sustained by beings to fuel this becoming. This becoming will be eternal, moreover, in Druidic thought, and God, who is the sum of all beings and things, *is not, but becomes*.

The key difference between the Cathars and the Celts is precisely that the latter do not believe in a primordial God: God is the culmination of the collective action of beings, and these beings simply originate from a God who exists solely as potential. But there is no fall of the Angels: there is evolution. Therefore, matter is not Evil; it is not even the means of ascension

of souls towards the Paradise of Light; it is the other aspect of Being, the first being the Spirit. On this basis, it is very difficult to discern any common ground between the Cathars and the Druids. Whatever degree of dualism the Cathars espoused—and even if this leads to a disguised form of monism, accessible only to theologians—there is a clear incompatibility between the two systems. For the Celts, God does not exist, but comes into being through Matter and Spirit, which are identical in essence but different in form; whereas for the Cathars, God *was*, and, following the fall of the Angels which dimmed his Light, he *returns to being* through the Spirit, by denying Matter, which is but an illusion.

Despite points of convergence, the two conceptions are irreconcilably contradictory. No Druid, if indeed any still existed, ever became a Cathar. All the rest is mere fantasy or delusion.

III

A SOLAR CULT?

Montségur is a site that attracts not only mystery enthusiasts, those nostalgic for the Cathars, or seekers of the Holy Grail. Since 1244, the place has become a symbol of the Occitan civilisation's resistance against the encroachments and, ultimately, the colonisation by the Langue d'Oïl civilisation. This is a historical fact, not a series of hypotheses about some secret.

The monument erected at the foot of *the hill* is telling: it commemorates an act of intolerance. And in doing so, it appeals to humanity's moral conscience. It may not have been at Montségur that Occitania ceased to be a country in its own right; that was more likely at Muret. But the massacre at Montségur speaks more powerfully to that moral conscience. Yes, it is certain that the Cathars and Occitans of all stripes, subjects of the Count of Toulouse or the Count of Foix, lost their independence here, just as the Bretons did at the end of the 15th century at Saint-Aubin-du-Cormier. The pyre of Montségur has become the simplest, most complete image of the triumph of French hegemony over a *different* Occitania. In essence, Montségur stands as a veritable war memorial. Yet here, *the dead* are honoured *for nothing*. Hence the sadness of this place. This explains why, today, Montségur is a place of pilgrimage for all those who have realised that they have been robbed of their souls.

The Occitans are a bit like the Cathars: the devil caught them unawares whilst they slept, and imprisoned them in a substance that was not their own, that was alien to them. A desperate pilgrimage, then, with a nostalgic gaze upon the mist-shrouded mountains: somewhere on the horizon lies the shadow of a lost land, causing pain to those who can still make it out through the turbulence of memory.

And yet, the wind carries strange voices. And the sun, behind the ridges, slips like a siren from the deep waters…

On the *hilltop* of Montségur, on the morning of the summer solstice, and almost exactly two days before and two days after, those who rise early – and there are many on this occasion – and who have the courage, or the passion, to make their way to the castle ruins, witness a fact of undeniable reality: the first ray of light, emerging from the darkness far to the east, grazing the peak of Bugarach, passes straight through the arrow slits of the keep.

This is obviously no coincidence. At Stonehenge, that strange circular monument on the Salisbury Plain in England, believed to be a solar sanctuary dating from the Megalithic period and completed in the Bronze Age, the first ray of the rising sun, on the summer solstice, strikes the central stone, following the path of a sort of ceremonial avenue. Diodorus of Sicily, who mentions the monument, recounts that local tradition holds that Apollo descends into the Stonehenge enclosure every nineteen years. This time span, incidentally, corresponds to a solar cycle that would later be adopted by Celtic Christians. And one could easily find other examples of this sort, if only in the alignments at Carnac, in Morbihan. There is therefore no doubt on this point: Montségur Castle was designed and built in such a way that the keep could receive the first rays of the sun at the summer solstice.

It has been concluded that Montségur, before being a defensive fortress and before becoming a major centre of Cathar resistance against the oppression of the Church and the Capetian monarchy, was a sanctuary. This assertion is also supported by the rather mysterious circumstances surrounding the surrender of Montségur in 1244: the besiegers granted the besieged a reprieve of fifteen days to leave the site on 16 March, and it has been deduced that this was to allow them to celebrate a final solar ritual festival, as 15 March was the date of the equinox that year. It has been calculated that the equinox did indeed take place on 15 March 1244. But what does this mean? The equinox is not the solstice. Furthermore, there has been talk of a *Manichaean* festival in this context. Yet the Cathars were not Manichaeans, even though they borrowed many elements from Mani's religion, and it is impossible to prove that solar ceremonies were actually celebrated by the Albigensians of the 12th and 13th centuries. It seems that this is nothing more than a misinterpretation.

Yet, on reflection, the problem is not so simple and cannot be resolved by a simple denial.

Firstly, Montségur's location is unique, and its orientation in relation to the Pic de Bugarach cannot fail to make an impression. Secondly, the military value of the structure – even though we do not know exactly what the original Cathar castle was like before the alterations of the late 13th century – is open to question: Montségur is defended more by the escarpment and the surrounding precipices than by its military architecture proper. The castle is small, the walls are not high enough, and the gates are far more ornamental than effective. Furthermore, the summit platform of *the hill* is not entirely occupied by the structure, with two or three metres left unused to the north and south: had the entire area been utilised, as at Peyrepertuse or Quéribus, the fortress would have been even better protected. Why this neglect?

It was in an attempt to answer this question that the hypothesis of a solar temple pre-dating the castle was put forward

the existing structure, which is thought to have been hastily fortified on the orders of Ramon de Perella by the engineer Arnaud de Beccalaria. Researchers such as Fernand Niel have carried out precise surveys, all of which highlight a concern for alignment with the rising sun. One thing is certain: the architectural layout of Montségur is essentially determined by solar considerations: each entry of the sun into a sign of the zodiac corresponds to a precise alignment with characteristic points of the castle. Furthermore, the castle is oriented in relation to the cardinal points in a very subtle way, which can only be understood by joining two of the building's corners with the centre of the opposing façades.

It is clear that if one is determined to find correlations between architectural features and solar alignments, one will always find them. At Carnac, researchers – whether somewhat distracted or singularly dishonest – draw up astonishing diagrams based on certain monuments, *whilst excluding from these diagrams any monuments that do not fit their narrative*. After which, they can make the vast megalithic complex of Carnac and its region say just about anything they want it to say. There is a touch of this at Montségur: Fernand Niel's surveys can really only convince those who are already convinced. One can prove anything if one puts one's mind to it, especially when one embellishes the facts.

But at Montségur, there is no need to over-interpret to see that the monument's construction did indeed follow certain precise guidelines. Is this an exception? If we were to carry out the same surveys on all medieval monuments and on all sites of any significance, we would arrive at virtually identical conclusions. In the Middle Ages, whether one was a Cathar, an orthodox Catholic, a heretic, or the heir to an ancient tradition, one never built a sanctuary, a fortress, or even a simple dwelling, without referring to religious, astrological or magi al criteria. This was a law of the time, and the builders of

Cathedral builders, whether consciously or not, followed a well-established tradition: the primary concern was the success of the work undertaken, and it is certain that these essential rules, passed down from generation to generation within the trades, tended to become *esoteric*, that is to say, known only to members of the guild. Hence their somewhat enigmatic nature, hence the 'secret' that surrounded them: when one knows a good recipe, one does not pass it on to just anyone; this is a phenomenon that is by no means exceptional.

We must therefore examine with the utmost caution the hypothesis that Montségur was a solar temple.

Firstly, not a single piece of archaeological evidence has ever been found to prove the physical existence of this temple. The interior architecture offers nothing distinctive, and the objects discovered within the enclosure or in the village, including the famous pentagrams, do not signify anything specific. Admittedly, proponents of the solar hypothesis have an easy time arguing that the Inquisition erased all traces of a cult deemed far too heretical to be preserved even in memory. Yet the Inquisition's records, though replete with testimonies and accusations, contain no mention of a so-called solar cult. Had there been one, the Inquisitors would certainly not have failed to note it and make good use of it against the accused. If ritual ceremonies similar to Manichaean – or even Zoroastrian – practices had taken place at Montségur or in other places frequented by the Cathars, we would know about it.

Of course, proponents of the solar hypothesis counter these negative arguments by pointing out that, as these ceremonies were secret, they left no traces, and the Perfect Ones, who were the only ones to take part in them, were careful not to reveal anything about them. That's convenient: one asserts the existence of something on the mere grounds that no one has spoken of it. That is what is known as a fallacy.

Then there is something more serious: a solar cult, whatever it may be, is a ceremonial element of a certain

importance. Yet all documents on the Cathars show that they always kept ritual to a minimum. Prayers, the administration of *the consolamentum* and fraternal gatherings during which sermons were heard—all this was carried out with the utmost simplicity, *and anywhere*, as the Cathars had no temples. Moreover, the very idea of a built temple is at odds with their doctrine, since matter is a diabolical creation. To imagine that Montségur could have been a sanctuary dedicated to the sun is the stuff of the wildest fantasy, for that would constitute a kind of challenge to Cathar thought.

That leaves the explanation based on solar symbolism. And here, the hypothesis can be supported with greater plausibility.

For it is true that Montségur was built in accordance with certain solar alignments. It is true that the sun plays a symbolic role in Cathar mythology: the sun is the image of the Primordial Light that gave birth to all creatures, and it stands as a still-visible testament to the spiritual connection of every creature to that Primordial Light. The Greek cross used by the Cathars, or the spiral cross, are unmistakable solar symbols, as is the ancient cross of the Volques Tectosages. There is nothing surprising or exceptional about this: the Celtic triskelion and the swastika, which became Germanic (but is in fact Indian in origin), are also solar symbols, and all traditions have seen the sun as a divine representation.

It is known that sun worship reached its peak during the Bronze Age, that is to say between 2000 and 700 BC, particularly in northern Europe, on the shores of the Baltic Sea. Numerous ritual objects date from this period, such as solar boats and chariots highlighting the generative role attributed to the sun, and even its role as a psychopomp. This religion (or these religions) of the Bronze Age was subsequently adopted by new civilisations, and this is why solar cults are found throughout the various religious traditions of Asia and Europe.

Among these traditions, we have seen that Mazdean formulations, through their simplicity and imagery accessible to all, strongly influenced a dualistic school of thought that led to the Cathars via the Mithraic cult, the Manichaeans and the Bogomils: and all practised, in one way or another, a cult in honour of the sun or used the solar image as a vehicle for teaching. Among the Celts, whilst the existence of a solar liturgy cannot be proven, we know that mythological themes referring to a female solar deity were numerous and well-known in tradition, and that these themes have survived among the Celts, if only in the so-called Arthurian romances, which draw their plots from the oral tales of the ancient Britons and Irish.

And official Christianity, too, has not failed to borrow elements from the ancient solar liturgies. The radiant Christ is nothing other than the modernisation of ancient beliefs: Jesus dying on the Cross and then rising again is the *Sol invictus* of the Mazdeans and the followers of Mithras, the divine Sun who dies and is reborn, taking all beings and things with him. Moreover, it is no coincidence that the feast commemorating the birth of Jesus was placed on 24 December. Firstly, this corresponded to the symbolic birth of Mithras, emerging from Mother Earth, and to the Roman festival of the Saturnalia, where a reversal of values took place. 24 December is indeed the time when the sun, after its slow descent towards winter and night, changes course and returns towards summer. And it is not entirely certain that the word '*Noël*' derives from the Latin '*Natale* (*die*)': it may well be that the term comes from the Greek '*neo hellos*', meaning 'new sun'. Such an etymology, which has always been dismissed by the proponents of the official Church, if it were authentic, would put quite a few things back in their proper place, the *birth* of Jesus being truly identified with the sun's *return*. In any case, there is no contradiction between the birth of a divine child *in a cave*—a birth celebrated by the *Angels*, the *Shepherds*, and then the *Magi*—and the realisation of a

a universal renewal at the moment when the Sun, that visible celestial body which bestows light and heat—and thus life—begins its ascent across the sky.

The problem, however, remains unresolved as far as the Cathars are concerned. They, who were opposed to any excessive materialisation and who shunned ceremonies deemed too 'pagan' or too 'diabolical', could they have accepted that, at certain times, one might enter into *communion* with the sunlight, even if only on a purely symbolic level? If this is the case, it is only natural that no mention is made of it in doctrinal texts: this concerned solely individual practice and did not feature in the official catalogue of beliefs. There is always a gap between a religion's doctrine and the way in which that doctrine was applied, and often the religious practices of the faithful seem to be in profound disagreement with the theoretical teaching. Can we therefore imagine that certain Cathars, more aware than others of their affiliation with the Manichaean movement, engaged in so-called 'solar' cultic practices, practices regarded above all as ascetic experiences?

The question is worth examining, particularly when considering Montségur and the distinctive feature of the keep (or what is known as the keep), whose arrow slits are pierced through and through by the sun's rays at the summer solstice. In truth, this is the only element that is truly significant, and it allows us, by comparison with ancient traditions that are not Cathar, to sketch out a hypothesis that is satisfactory to everyone.

We recall the role played by the Gospel of Saint John in Cathar doctrine, particularly with regard to the Word and the Light, the two being, moreover, identified with one another. For the Cathars, the aim was to find in the texts a justification for their belief in a primordial kingdom of Light. They also drew upon an apocryphal text from the biblical tradition, *The Vision of Isaiah*, of which three manuscripts have come down to us

preserved an Ethiopian translation based on a Greek original that is now lost. It is a kind of compilation centred on the figure of the prophet Isaiah and, in particular, his ascent to the seventh Heaven. It is likely that **The Vision of Isaiah** derives from the same archaic model as the Mazdean narrative known as the *Book of Arda Virâf*: during a seven-day trance, the hero is carried up to the heavens and visits the spheres of the moon, the sun and the stars—that is to say, purgatory—and then hell and the heaven of Ahura-Mazda.

In **The Vision of Isaiah**, one can discern a wide variety of influences: Hebrew, of course, but also Persian, Christian and, undoubtedly, Gnostic. The emphasis is placed on a hierarchy of spiritual realms corresponding to different states and represented by the seven heavens. This theory of the seven heavens dates back quite a long way. It is found among the Babylonians as well as the Jews, and the Cathars adopted it as their own. But for them, as for the author – who was not a Cathar – of *The Vision of Isaiah*, only the sixth and seventh heavens were entirely spiritual. In the lower heavens, the angels were not united with the divinity, nor with one another, quite so closely. Moreover, they were curiously 'polarised' into Angels of the Right and Angels of the Left. It is for this reason, moreover, that another Cathar text, *The Secret Supper*, claims that Satan never succeeded in seducing the Angels except in the lower heavens, up to the fifth heaven. The sixth and seventh heavens are places where the Light preserves and perpetuates its complete purity: 'And the eyes of my soul were opened, and I saw a great glory, and its radiance was so dazzling that I could no longer see either the angel who was with me, nor all the angels I had seen praising my Lord. ' This means that the spiritual Light of the seventh heaven is of such an exceptional nature that it eclipses all other lights. There is certainly the same idea in Chrétien de Troyes' description of the Light emanating from the Holy Grail in his **Perceval**: this light eclipses not only the glow of candles, but also the rays of the sun.

The key point to remember, then, is that somewhere—and symbolically *at the very heights of the heavens*—there exists a special place where the Light is of absolute purity. Thus, it is possible to regard the keep of Montségur, penetrated by the sun at the summer solstice—that is, by the purest, freshest, most dazzling light—as a representation of this seventh heaven.

The theme is found in popular tradition, and is particularly prominent in Celtic mythology: it is the well-known motif of *the Castle in the Airs*, and in its most archaic form, the *Chamber of the Sun*.

In a Breton tale entitled *The *Saga of* **Yann***[32], the hero, guided by a horse who is in fact a magician – his own father – in animal form, goes from one adventure to the next and is led to win the hand of King Fortunatus's daughter on behalf of the King of Brittany. There is, in fact, a parallel here with the legend of Tristan, the hero playing the role of the nephew who goes to 'win' his uncle's fiancée. Thanks to the magician, and thanks to the intervention of animals to whom he had done a favour, he wins the girl, but she, during the return journey, laments: 'Farewell, my father, farewell, people of my country, farewell, my beautiful castle, you who are supported by four golden chains, and by four lions, the strongest in the whole land! I was happy when I lived there! And your golden keys, what use will they be to me now, save to increase my sorrow and my grief?" And the princess, instead of making the hero drink a potion, as Isolde did to Tristan, throws the golden keys into the sea.

Of course, when she is brought before the king who is to become her husband, she will only consent to the marriage if her 'beautiful castle, supported by four golden chains and four lions', is brought to her here. It is clear that the princess, who belongs to the Celtic Otherworld, finds herself in

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[32] J. Markale, *La tradition celtique en Bretagne armoricaine*, Paris, Payot, 4th ed., 1984, pp. 148–168.

exile with the King of Brittany. And to make this exile less painful, she demands the presence of this 'Castle in the Airs', which will serve as a kind of link for her to the Otherworld from whence she comes. The theme is Cathar: the fallen Angel – the princess – holds the primordial Light in her memory, and she attempts, through a symbolic ritual, to restore this lost Light.

The 'Castle in the Air' appears in numerous folk tales, not only from Brittany but from all regions of Europe. In the *Saga of Koadalan*, a strange Breton tale[33], the magician Foukes lives 'in a golden castle, held in place by four silver chains, between heaven and earth'. In another Breton tale, *Les* Femmes-cygnes[34], the daughters of a powerful enchanter "live in a beautiful palace entirely decorated with gold and crystal, a beautiful palace that stands very high in the sky, held aloft by four golden chains above the sea". In the Languedoc version of this tale, *La Montagne* noire[35], the sorcerer's daughters are swan-women, and the castle stands on a very high mountain. The same is true of the Basque version of the tale[36]. But the essential element is the presence of this very solar-looking castle in the sky, regardless of how it is suspended—whether by chains or on a rocky outcrop. It must be said, however, that the theme of swan-women seems the most archaic: the swan is a solar Hyperborean animal, and Celtic mythology abounds with examples of women who can appear in the form of swans. These women belong to the Otherworld; they are fairies, deities or, according to Cathar terminology, Angels. They are also found in Germanic-Scandinavian mythology, where the Valkyrie, in love with the hero Siegfried-Sigurd, also appears in the form of a swan, further evidence of its solar symbolism.

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[33] J. Markale, **The Celtic Tradition**, pp. 169–185.

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 186–191.

[35] J. Markale, *Occitan Tales*, Paris, Stock, 1982, pp. 223–233.

[36] J. Markale, *Récit de la mort des pays de France*, Paris, Ch. de Bartillat, 1986.

But it is in another Breton tale, **The Castle in the* **Airs*[37]**, that the plot takes on its full significance. The young hero, who has set out on an adventure to earn his living, finds himself facing countless difficulties. He manages to overcome them through his determination and skill, but now he finds himself in a haunted castle, from which he lifts the spells. Now, in the garden of this castle, there is a young girl half-submerged in a well. This theme is that of the Castle of Douloureuse Garde, where Lancelot du Lac, in the 13th-century prose version, must perform miracles, in particular rescuing the young girl from the hellish well in which she is half-submerged. But in the Breton tale, the hero must keep watch for three nights to rescue the young girl. He succeeds, but falls asleep at the end nonetheless. 'The maiden could not wake him. Yet she said to him: "You will find me in a castle bound by three golden chains above the water, but you will not reach it until you have worn out a pair of iron-shod shoes." ' And the young man sets off on this quest for the Castle in the Air, and discovers it thanks to the help of an old man, three ravens, a band of owls and a giant to whom, during the journey, *he must feed a piece of his own buttock.*

All these details are significant. The princess is none other than the angelic soul that still dwells in the Kingdom of Light, like the hope rooted in the heart of every creature. One need only set out in search of this soul to restore the primal unity shattered at the Fall. But not everyone is capable of completing this quest: in most tales, the young hero's two elder brothers have set out and failed for one reason or another, but in reality because they were incapable of seeing beyond their physical form. The hero, always the youngest, reaches the final stage: yet there he falls asleep, so great is the weight of matter. It is then up to the angelic soul to show him the way forward, or at least to provide the theoretical guidance for this

[37] J. Markale, *The Celtic Tradition*, pp. 262–266.

journey. For the hardest part lies ahead: finding the Castle in the Skies by seeking the help of guides qualified for the task. And the outcome will only be successful if the young hero parts with a piece of his flesh: this quite clearly symbolises the abandonment of a certain materiality.

Within the very framework of the tale, there is *a quest*, and this is obviously what matters most in order to return to the origins. But if the Original Light remains abstract, too distant to be grasped by human consciousness, it offers no interest and arouses no desire on the part of the Fallen Angel. This Primordial Light must therefore be transposed into the realm of sensible realities: hence the image of the Castle in the Airs, held in place by three or four chains of gold or silver, brilliant in any case. But held in place by what? By the heavens, by that mysterious heaven which is the place where Light knows no bounds. Sometimes, it is four lions that hold the castle: lions are a sign of fire, and thus of light, as well as of strength and nobility, and in this we find the nobility of origins.

However, this castle in the Airs becomes a fantastical object. It is the mirror in which that which is above is reflected, the prism towards which all the sun's rays converge. It is through this particularly spellbinding image that the fallen creature sustains its hope and sets its course of action in motion. The theme circulated throughout the Middle Ages and became woven into numerous legends. Thus we find it in the legend of Tristan and Iseult, which is decidedly closely linked to Catharism, at least in one of the episodes of this legend, the *Folie Tristan*.

This is the story of one of Tristan's visits to Queen Isolde, right under King Mark's nose (who represents the night). The hero is disguised as a fool (hence the episode's title), that is to say, as a jester, which allows him to ramble with impunity before the court and to speak to Yseult in language of perfect ambiguity. At one point, the fool asks the king to entrust Queen Yseult to him. Mark then asks where he will take her. Tristan replies: to a crystal chamber, up there in the sky, where

all the sun's rays converge, and where Yseult and he himself may know absolute happiness.

This is not an image invented by the author of the text of *La *Folie Tristan**. It is found in two very ancient tales from the Irish epic, **The Voyage of Art** and **The Tale of Étaine**[38]. In the first tale, it is a 'crystal chamber' where the young hero ; in the second, it is a 'sun-chamber' where the heroine, in the guise of an insect, taken in by the hero Œngus, will regain her strength, which had been sapped by a violent magical storm. And, in a third Irish epic text, *The Voyage of Maelduin*, it is in the midst of a glass citadel, in a crystal chamber containing vats filled with an inexhaustible drink, that the hero is welcomed by the queen of the mysterious island, an island that clearly represents this image of the fortress lost in the skies.

It is worth remembering, moreover, that when Merlin, the enchanter of the Arthurian legends, is bewitched by the fairy Viviane—to whom he has willingly revealed his secrets—he finds himself in an invisible castle, deep in the forest: and this castle is described as either a prison of air or a fortress of glass. The mythological image is identical: it is indeed a place regarded as the crucible where the sun's rays are fused, a sort of *athanor* where the metamorphosis of the Prima Materia into the Philosopher's Stone takes place. The Castle in the Airs, or any other equivalent representation, always depicted as the possession of an enchanter, or a fairy, or a mysterious queen who is in fact the ancient Sun Goddess, is the *place of transmutation*. And to speak in Cathar terms, it is there that the creature, mired in matter, awakens and receives the beneficent rays of the Original Light. The passage into this Castle in the Airs, the materialisation of a reality far more subtle, far more abstruse, is a necessary stage in attaining the

[38] J. Markale, *The Celtic Epic of Ireland*, Paris, Payot, 2nd ed., 1978.

reintegration of the angelic soul into its original fullness. And this 'Chamber of the Sun' can only be found *in the heavens, on an island* in the middle of the ocean, or, at a pinch, *on the summit of a mountain.*

This is the case with Montségur.

It is quite possible that the famous room in the keep, which receives the sun's rays at the summer solstice, is the architectural illustration of this mythological theme, which itself encompasses an essential ontological truth within Cathar doctrine. Let us not speak of *a solar temple*, for it is certainly not one, as the Cathars were averse to building sanctuaries in the strict sense of the word. It is more likely a place of meditation, a *sacred* place certainly, but one that acquires value only within the context of individual awareness. At that point, one might use the word 'initiation', but only on condition that it is stripped of any ritual or magical connotations. The Cathars never incorporated elements of magic into their practices. In fact, they definitively rejected any recourse to operative magic, which nevertheless characterises many religions, including Roman or Byzantine Catholicism. It is in this sense of a rejection of all ritual and all magic that Protestants can be regarded as the distant heirs of the Cathars.

The 'Sun Room' at Montségur is perhaps the Cathars' only secret, perhaps even their only 'treasure'. But there is nothing exceptional or mysterious about this secret, as it concerns an individual attitude, a simple form of meditation that any believer can practise in order to attain enlightenment. There are, of course, connections between this 'Chamber of the Sun' and the 'Tomb' where the apprentice mason meditates before appearing before his new brothers. But there is a fundamental difference: the tomb belongs to the mythological apparatus of the ancient, earth-centred religion, and it is within Mother Earth that the metamorphosis takes place; the Chamber of the Sun belongs to the mythology of a new, heaven-centred religion, and it is in the realm of the spirit, subtle fire and immanent Light

, that the transformation of the old man, the sleeping Angel, into the new man, the awakened Angel, takes place; the latter now acquires the desire to undertake his ascent towards the immeasurable heights of the seventh heaven.

This is merely a hypothesis. But it has the merit of restoring Montségur's status as a sanctuary without falling into the trap of purely fanciful solar rituals, for which no document concerning the Cathars could provide any justification. The Cathars are certainly the heirs of the Manicheans and the Mazdeans, who practised a form of worship that could be classified as solar – albeit with all the usual reservations, as we do not know its exact scope. But the Cathars always demonstrated a desire to purify the ritual and never to sacrifice the Spirit to Matter. The so-called Manichaean ceremony of 15 March 1244, held on the occasion of the spring equinox, seems to have existed only in the imagination of 20th-century commentators. We have no evidence of it. And such a ceremony runs counter to the very spirit of Catharism, to its simplicity and austerity.

On the other hand, the hall in the keep at Montségur does indeed exist, with its distinctive features. It is difficult to deny or ignore such a reality.

So why should it not be a meditation chamber, one of those 'Chambers of the Sun' whose traces are found throughout the oral tradition of Western Europe, and which is the symbolic prism where the rays of all suns—material or spiritual—converge, as mythologies and their derivatives, epics and folk tales, have so often placed as the goal of every human quest towards the Light?

IV

THE CATHARS AND THE NORTHERNERS

Over the past hundred years or so, amongst all those who have taken an interest in the Cathar question and its deeper significance, it is curious to note that, apart from the Occitans themselves—who are deeply committed to this subject—there has been a large number of people from the 'north' who are connected in one way or another with the major themes of Norse mythology. These are primarily German intellectuals, but also Dutch, Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian, and the usual cohort of Hermeticists and esotericists from northern France, who seem to have been strongly influenced by the Symbolist and Decadent circles of late 19th-century Paris, where we find notably Huysmans, Mallarmé, Rémy de Gourmont, Élimir Bourges, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, Maurice Maeterlinck, Claude Debussy, 'Sir' Péladan, the enigmatic Jules Bois – who was the official lover of Emma Calvé, a correspondent and no doubt mistress of Abbé Saunière –, Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, Stanislas de Guaïta and many others, among whom we must not forget to mention the very Voltairean Anatole France (far less realistic than one might think) and the novelist Jules Verne, who is wrongly regarded as an author of works for young people.

All these new discoverers of the Cathars belong to a wide variety of schools of thought, and it would be difficult to discern a unified approach amongst them. Their only common ground would be the spell cast upon them by the work of Richard Wagner, even if some, having adored it to excess, like

Debussy, reject it outright. And Wagner's influence is not insignificant in this rediscovery of Catharism: on the one hand, it will help to fuel in-depth research and will often lead to original observations; on the other hand, it completely distorted the motivations behind this research by superimposing the metaphysical and mythological elements of what was, after all, a Mediterranean heresy onto one of the most questionable forms of German esotericism.

One must, however, be wary of the Mediterranean aspect of Catharism. Admittedly, it developed mainly in Italy and Occitania, and forms part of a movement attested in the Near East, with its precise origins in Persia. But what does this mean? It was northern Italy that was affected by the Cathar heresy, not southern Italy: and we know that northern Italy, especially in the Middle Ages, was more than ever a mosaic of peoples who were not southern, Celts from the Po Valley, Lombards and Ostrogoths, Venetians and Illyrians of more obscure origin, all of whom were influenced by Slavic infiltrations via the Balkans (the Bogomils in particular) and subject to the Holy Roman Empire. Similarly, it was not the whole of Occitania that was affected by Catharism, but essentially the former Septimania, in other words the Visigothic region, where the Germanic invaders, originally from Sweden, had intermingled with a native Celtic population that had been scarcely touched by Romanisation. Thus, *Germanic* elements are brought to light in the emergence of the Albigensian heresy.

Moreover, whilst Catharism has Christian overtones, and whilst the doctrine of the Perfect Ones draws on certain Judeo-Christian texts – whilst disregarding others that are equally significant – it is difficult to regard it honestly as a deviation from Christianity. It is, in fact, a religion quite distinct in its own right, and its only connection to Christianity lies in its immediate context. It is not even a heresy, but the culmination of a so-called dualistic system dating back to the

ancient times, and thus to pre-Christian religions. And what must be emphasised is that, at its core, the system is clearly Indo-European in nature, which is to be expected, given that the Iranians are a branch of this mysterious people who spread far and wide and are known chiefly for their language and socio-cultural structures.

Admittedly, there have been changes. The dualist theory is scarcely recognisable in Greek theogony, though Indo-European in origin, nor in Celtic mythology, which also stems from the same source. On the other hand, it seems to have been preserved intact, in broad terms, in Germanic-Scandinavian mythology.

To be clear: our knowledge of the mythology of the peoples classified as Germanic comes solely from comparing the accounts of the Roman Tacitus, medieval German literature, and the late yet archaic-sounding sagas of Iceland; indeed, it is appropriate to include the Scandinavian and Icelandic peoples within the broader continental group of the Germanic peoples. Thus, the German god Wotan is none other than Tacitus's Wutanaz, and he is also the Odin of the Icelandic poems; and whilst the Germans speak of Siegfried, the Scandinavians know him by the name of Sigurd. In any case, were it not for the major texts written down around the year 1000 by the Scandinavians newly converted to Christianity, we would know nothing of the primitive mythology of the peoples of continental Germania.

That being said, clear connections can be observed between the main elements of the mythology of the Indo-Europeans of Central Asia and Germanic-Scandinavian mythology. It is therefore not surprising to note points of convergence between the latter and the Mazdean tradition, which is essentially Indo-European in origin from Central Asia.

All mythology reflects the characteristics of the civilisation it embodies, and among these characteristics, climatic conditions play a part. Thus, in the tales handed down from the ancient Scythians of Asia

central, and which Georges Dumézil has patiently reconstructed[39], one can observe a clear tendency to explain the world through a perpetual struggle between two opposing forces: cold and heat. This is indicative of a harsh continental climate where the disparity between winter and summer is perceived as the consequence of a colossal clash between gods of opposing polarities: the origin of dualism must be sought in this state of affairs, and the struggle between Ahura-Mazda, who is Light and Fire, and Ahriman, who is Darkness and Cold, translates into mythological terms a reality of everyday life.

In these tales of Scythian origin, a character named Batraz appears: he is a hero born in a most unusual way, for his mother having died before he was born, his embryo was nurtured by his father, beneath the skin of his back. At his birth, Batraz appears as a man clad in iron and utterly radiant. He radiates incredible warmth around him, and throughout his life, he battles against dark and cold forces and stands as the protector of his people.

This Batraz is found in Irish mythology under the name of Cú Chulainn: but he has lost his original character; he is merely a fearsome warrior whose ardour must sometimes be cooled by immersing him in vats of cold water that he himself brings to the boil. But in Germanic-Scandinavian mythology, he appears as the quintessential warrior whom the Valkyries seek out on the battlefields to carry to Valhalla. It is with such figures, as strong as iron and as fiery as fire, that the gods will be able to effectively oppose the powers of Darkness, the Giants, who, in the depths of the earth, are preparing to launch an assault against the divine realm, against that fortress of Asgard where the Aesir and Vanir gods have taken refuge, and of which Valhalla forms the bulwark. In short, the gods of Asgard are the Pure, the Perfect, and the warriors of Valhalla are the Believers who, not yet completely freed from the yoke

[39] G. Dumézil, *Romans de Scythie et alentours*, Paris, Payot, 1977.

of matter, form an intermediate group between the world of Evil and the world of Good.

The key difference is that in Cathar doctrine, eschatology is optimistic (Satan and his legions will be cast into a lake of fire), whereas in Germanic mythology, the Giants of the Cold, by rushing upon the divine world, will trigger a final battle in which Fire will destroy everything, including the gods. A single hope remains: Baldr, the son of Wotan-Odin, treacherously slain by Loki, will be reborn and bring with him the rebirth of an entirely different world. But this notion remains particularly unclear in the Norse texts, and one wonders, ultimately, whether Germanic-Scandinavian thought is not entirely conditioned by the belief in the annihilation of beings and things.

In any case, among the Norse peoples as well as the Cathars, there is an expression of an unrelenting struggle between the two principles: Light-Fire and Darkness-Cold. The souls of the fallen Angels lie dormant, numbed in the cold darkness of Satan's realm, that is to say, in Matter. Only those souls touched by the divine Fire, emanating from the realm of Light, can awaken and answer the call. And one realises that perhaps, at the end of time, the triumph of Fire that characterises Germanic-Scandinavian eschatology will be the final victory of the Beings of Light over the Beings of the Night: Baldr, who is undoubtedly the same figure as Batraz, will be reborn from his own heat, like the Phoenix of Mediterranean legends. But at what cost? At the cost of the ultimate renunciation, the annihilation of all earthly substance, and even more: the total extinction of the human race, which is but the temporary, transitory and corruptible prison of this primordial Light. In a sense, in Germanic-Scandinavian mythology, the New Man can only be different, and he will appear only at the cost of a gigantic conflagration. This idea exists in Cathar doctrine: absolute purification will be achieved only through fire. And this justifies

the attitude of the Perfect Ones as they rushed into the flames of the pyre at Montségur, singing hymns to the glory of the Light.

Purification: that is the key word.

From the Cathar perspective, this seems logical given that the material world is explained as a fall from a primitive angelic state to a diabolical one. But this notion is absent from the German-Scandinavian tradition: in the beginning was Chaos, and it was from this Chaos that consciousness slowly emerged. But once set in motion, this consciousness can no longer stop, and it must go to the very furthest limits, break free from the shell that binds it on all sides, and purify itself through the struggle that is life with all its vicissitudes. One can read some strange reflections in **The Court of Lucifer**, that book by Otto Rahn which is in fact something of a travel diary from his stay in Cathar country:

"I have come from the North. I wish to head south. No sooner have I begun my journey than I find myself looking north once more. Towards 'Midnight', where it is said the Mountain of Gathering and the Crown lie. " And again: "Tomorrow, at about this time, I shall therefore journey southwards with the desire in my heart to illuminate this darkness as much as I can. May I be granted the privilege of being a 'bearer of light'!"

The words of a visionary, no doubt. Otto Rahn's work has no scientific or even esoteric value. It is a jumble of confused musings and false observations, yet it is revealing. For Otto Rahn's words are those of a *man on a mission*, of someone who believes in good faith that he has found an ideal place where Light will conquer Darkness. For him, that place would be Montségur, the fortress on the hilltop, where the rising sun of the solstice enters the 'meditation chamber'. There, purification and regeneration can symbolically take place.

The connotation is obviously suspect, especially given that Rahn belonged to the SS. Behind Otto Rahn's *mission* loom disturbing shadows.

First and foremost is the enigmatic Hans Horbiger, the author of a somewhat far-fetched theory on the origin and evolution of the world. For Horbiger's thinking, with its assertion of the primordial existence of a vast accumulation of cosmic ice, his history of humanity centred on a perpetual struggle between ice and fire, between the force of repulsion and the force of attraction, represented a revival, at the beginning of the 20th century, of German-Scandinavian mythology from a racial perspective not far removed from that of National Socialism. Indeed, Horbiger was held in high esteem within Hitler's inner circle. A German writer, Elcmar Brugg, wrote a glowing tribute to Hans Horbiger in 1925: 'Horbiger's enduring merit lies in having powerfully revived the intuitive knowledge of our ancestors through the eternal conflict of fire and ice, as sung of in *the Edda*. He laid this conflict bare before the eyes of his contemporaries. He has scientifically established this grandiose image of the world linked to the dualism of matter and force, of the repulsion that scatters and the attraction that gathers."

It reads like a Cathar text. Is not the *repulsion that scatters* the Fall of the Angels and the creation of matter by Satan? Is not the *attraction that gathers* the Primordial Light that draws angelic souls, once they have been roused from their torpor, back to the point of gathering, in that *great mythical North* that haunts Otto Rahn's imagination?

Since the Romantic era, and particularly in Germany, a whole school of thought known as *'Nordic'* has developed, which has been contrasted with the Mediterranean school of thought. Madame de Staël was undoubtedly its initiator, and the discovery of Celtic and Germanic mythological traditions during the 19th century demonstrated that, indeed, there were indeed two systems at play, two contradictory logics: one Nordic and barbaric, the other Mediterranean and Aristotelian, which dominated the West for many centuries, stifling or banishing the other logic into the darkness of the unconscious. Theories, such as Horbiger's, which were entirely anti-scientific,

have bolstered the *Nordic* rights movements by giving them a dimension they did not initially possess, since they were originally concerned exclusively with mythology, sensibility, art and literature. In fact, by seeking to provide them with a scientific basis, these movements were transformed into political and philosophical instruments. And Nordic myths, such as Hyperborea, Atlantis and *Ultima Thule*, were to become the symbols of a new way of thinking about humanity: truth came from the North, and this truth had been obscured for twenty centuries or more by Mediterranean thought, perpetuated by Judeo-Christian doctrines. To restore this truth, one need only sweep aside the Judeo-Christian doctrines and restore the ancient traditions of the North to their rightful place. And beyond that, one revived all the doctrines that had been persecuted by the dominant ideology—esoteric, religious and philosophical doctrines, classified as heretical.

It is certainly true that, from this perspective, the Cathars—persecuted by the Inquisition and massacred by the temporal powers allied with the spiritual authorities held by the Judeo-Christians—became role models, all the more so as parallels were seen between their doctrine and Germanic-Scandinavian thought. This explains the interest shown in Cathar heresy by the Germans and, more generally, by all 'Nordic' peoples, at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

Added to this were the activities of numerous esoteric societies which claimed to hold 'lost secrets' and to possess a direct lineage tracing back to the great 'initiates' of days gone by. Among these, the *Golden Dawn*, founded in 1887, had its roots in the Rosicrucian tradition, which had been revived in Britain around 1867. This Golden Dawn had set itself the goal of practising ceremonial magic and acquiring knowledge of initiatory powers. One of its presidents was the Irish poet Yeats, one of the revivers of the Celtic tradition. Il y had also the all-powerful Society of

Theosophy, from which Rudolf Steiner would soon break away. And, still in England, one of the members of the *Golden Dawn*, Aleister Crowley, expressed rather strange ideas concerning the permanence of an initiatory tradition passed down by a race that had remained pure throughout the centuries. It is well known that Crowley would later say: 'Before Hitler was, I am.' ' This suggests that all these secret societies had certain unfortunate tendencies to view the existence of a pure and authentic tradition as linked to a pure race bearing all the hopes of humanity.

In Germany itself, through the revival of *the Enlightenment*, through the offshoots of the Rosicrucians and the extensions of the *Golden Dawn*, the early 20th century saw the emergence of so-called philosophical sects which made little secret of their belief in the 'pure race' – the 'Aryan' race, of course – and which loudly proclaimed the supremacy of the 'Nordic' tradition over the cosmopolitanism represented by the Mediterranean. It was amidst this teeming multitude of sects that the famous Thule Society came into being, a group which had an undeniable influence on the formation of Nazi ideology.

The Thule Society grew out of *the Order of the Germans*, founded in 1912. One of the Order's leading figures, Rudolf von Sebottendorf, was in charge of the Bavarian 'province', and it was he who led the 'province' into a split that resulted in the formation of the Thule Society. The name chosen for this society is telling: it is a specific reference to *Ultima Thule*, that mythical yet very real island of the Hyperboreans, where the eternal struggle between Fire and Ice (volcanoes and sea ice) takes place. It is possible that the name Thule derives from an Indo-European root meaning 'balance' (in Sanskrit, *Tûla*) and that it once denoted the position of the North Star in the constellation of Libra. It is also possible to see in it the Greek word *tholos*, meaning 'fog', which would describe this distant island rather well. Be that as it may, the Thule Group exerted a profound influence on men who went on to found the National Socialist party in

Bavaria. Without dwelling on this point, let us nevertheless recall what Alfred Rosenberg, one of Nazism's most virulent theorists, wrote on the subject: 'The Thule Society? But that's where it all began! The secret teachings we were able to draw from it served us better in our quest for power than the divisions of
SA and the SS. The men who founded this association were true magicians."

This magical aspect of the Thule Society has been extensively studied, as has the movement's initiatory origins. There is no need to revisit this, but it is important to consider the interest shown in the Cathars by all manner of more or less secret and ostensibly philosophical societies, in light of the revival of Nordic symbolism. The Cathars may have been active in southern countries, but the *Nordic* elements of their doctrine are beyond doubt and sufficiently explain why contemporary 'Nordics' have long studied them, seeking to determine the exact meaning of their approach and, if they had any 'secrets', what those secrets might be. The invasion of the 'Polar People', reported on 6 March 1932 in the Ariège edition of *La Dépêche*, is no legend: in fact, that year, Otto Rahn arrived in the region of Ussat and Ornolac. And the Toulouse daily posed these questions: 'What will these searches yield, and who will be the first to discover the Cathar treasures and manuscripts – Mr Arnaud, the French engineer, at Montségur, or Mr Rams (*sic*, this is Rahn), the German "Polar", at Ornolac? ' As if to say that the real or imagined, fantastical or symbolic goal of any research in Cathar country is always that of a 'treasure'.

The 'Polar People' referred to in 1932 were, according to **La Dépêche**, 'a group of foreign visitors belonging to a theosophical society based in Paris'. But the reference to the 'Polar People' is not without reason. Germanic-Scandinavian mythology certainly goes hand in hand with Catharism.

The question is not what these
'Polar' visitors were looking for, nor whether Otto Rahn discovered what he was seeking, namely confirmation of what the philosophical or initiatory societies of the early 20th century claimed. One always finds what one has decided to find. The question is why Montségur and the Cathar sites so fascinated the 'Nordic' researchers.

In Germanic-Scandinavian mythology, the North is no longer a geographical landmark, but a symbolic place, the place where the great forces that animate the world converge. The idea of *a pole*, and especially the North Pole, which is linked to the scientific fact of the existence of a mass of magnetised iron somewhere not far from the pole, represents the human desire to define a centre for vital activity, a sort of pivot around which the universe is organised, whether material or spiritual. The pole is the equivalent of *the omphalos*, that is to say, the navel of the world. It is the point which, in the past, was symbolically in contact with the first cause: the umbilical cord has been cut, and there is no longer any effective link between the world and the mother-substance, but there is a wound, a scar, and this scar can always reopen, allowing for a new contact, a new fusion with what was *before*. Every initiatory doctrine needs to be nourished by a primordial substance that justifies it and enables it to endure. Spirituality, whatever form it takes, is not a creation *ex nihilo*, and it is linked, for better or worse, to an *illud tempus*, as Mircea Eliade puts it, without which it no longer makes any sense. And while this *illud tempus* is not recorded in calendars or in the Annals, it nonetheless exists through the inescapable link between today's thought and yesterday's. Every doctrine, that is to say, every attempt to explain the world, must rest on a solid foundation; yet this foundation will be all the more solid, all the more indisputable, the more closely it is linked to a myth of origins. The pole, like *the omphalos*, is the privileged place where the origin myth resides. Such was the case with Delphi for the religious thought of the Greeks. Such was the case with

Tara in the mythological thought of the ancient Irish. Such was the case with the sanctuary in the forest of the Carnutes where, according to Caesar, druids from all over Gaul gathered.

However, in the case of Catharism, as in that of Germanic-Scandinavian mythology, the ideal place, the most suitable place to serve as a focal point, is the Pole – the absolute North, lost amidst the ice, harbouring a mystery concealed beneath the thickness of the pack ice and, by its very nature, a realm of whiteness and primordial purity. The North Pole is easily seen as a place from which all physical or spiritual pollution is excluded. It is the place where there is no Evil, since Evil is imperfection, pollution, degeneration. The Pole, lost amidst the ice, represents quite well what the human mind conceives as most akin to the primitive angelic state, at least within the Cathar framework. But the Pole is ambiguous: ice and cold also signify the numbing of intellectual and spiritual values. Cold is death. Cold is the impossibility of action; it is a kind of Nirvana where all desire to live is extinguished. Thus, it becomes potential energy: the Pole is virgin, but as such, it is rich in future.

It would appear that Montségur did indeed serve as such a focal point. The clamour of everyday life does not reach the summit of *the hill*. This *hill* lies between heaven and earth, like the 'Chamber of the Sun' of legend. But it is also the Fortress trapped in ice, a fortress from which one cannot escape once inside, and into which one cannot enter because the ice barriers are far more impassable than the stone walls of a very real castle. This may be the image of Asgard, that Olympus of the Germanic peoples, the place where Odin-Wotan resides when he is not travelling, draped in a great cloak, wearing a wide hat which he pulls down over his brow, emerging unexpectedly from the conspiring shadows, with his single, blazing eye—a remnant of sunlight still binding him to his origin.

According to Irish tradition, Druidism is said to have been brought from the 'Northern Isles of the World'. Thus, Celtic culture was linked to the Norse myth of the origin of the

world, but this should not be taken literally. The ideal north, the spiritual north from which science, magic and religion emanate, is merely a guide: in fact, the north can be everywhere and nowhere at the same time, for it concerns a feeling rather than a rational concept that would stand no chance of being taken seriously. It has always been known that the North is the direction of mystery, of that which is murky, misty, insubstantial. But this is meant for ordinary mortals, for the daring who dare to cross the barrier of mist or ice, who dare to confront the silence, can see what lies on *the other side*. It is always the same quest, perpetually restarted, perpetually called into question: over there, in the distance, lies certainty, but few are those who reach it.

That is why so many people set out to climb the *hill* of Montségur. It is a symbolic focal point, a mythological Olympus, the navel of the world. The presence of the Cathars and the search for the secret they are said to have hidden there are merely a pretext: the real point is to scale the mountain's slopes and emerge into the full light. Among most ancient peoples, one faced the rising sun, and to the left lay the *sinister* side, the unsettling side, the side of mystery. Because there, towards the north, there is never any sun: consequently, it is in this direction that it must manifest itself in the most secret manner imaginable, and only to those who can discern it in the darkness.

Such seems to be the meaning of the pole, and particularly of the North Pole, which draws in and carries with it all the images of rediscovered Purity. Montségur, the 'beacon' of Catharism, could be nothing else.

V

MONTSÉGUR AND THE GRAIL

In 1933, shortly after Otto Rahn had made his presence felt in the upper Ariège valley and at Montségur, a curious discovery was made in a small cave situated beneath the ruins of Montréal-de-Sos Castle. It was a symbolic image painted on one of the smooth walls of the cave, which was reported by Alex Coutet in an article in *La Dépêche*, and later examined by a prehistorian, the Reverend Glory.

Here is Alex Coutet's description: 'It is a red square with sides measuring approximately forty centimetres. Two smaller squares are inscribed within it, one inside the other. Double-lined crosses—alternating between Greek crosses and St Andrew's crosses—form a sort of frame around the innermost square, within which are depicted further crosses alternating with red flames. Outside the square and above it, a spear protrudes; next to the spear is a circle with a red outline and a grey-white interior. Six single-line crosses are scattered outside the square."

That is all. But in the words of Antonin Gadal, it becomes something quite different: "It is in this cave with a double, even triple exit… that there is a three-coloured image, white, black and red: a drawing relating directly to *Perceval the Welshman*, by Chrétien de Troyes. On the rock face, one can see, of a good size but slightly weathered: red crosses, a broken sword, a spear, a taillover (*sic*)

decorated with five drops of blood and, in the centre, the Grail in the form of a radiant sun. A design unique in the world: a single glance, and the entire Book of *Perceval* instantly unfolds before you[40]". This is followed by various comments supposedly drawn from Chrétien de Troyes, but in fact borrowed from all sorts of sources, including the text by Wolfram von Eschenbach, *the Estoire du saint Graal*, and the *Quête du saint Graal*. It is clear that Antonin Gadal never read Chrétien de Troyes' text in its entirety – nor indeed the other texts. He would have realised that *the three colours he mentions (white, black and red) do not appear in Chrétien de Troyes' text (there are only two: white and red)*, but in a Welsh text which is the tale of Peredur. This is, moreover, a veritable cliché in Celtic literature[41].

So here is the Holy Grail in Montréal-de-Sos, having previously been in the castle of Montségur, located there by none other than Antonin Gadal! The trouble is that this painting is not in the least Cathar, nor Templar, nor even contemporary with Chrétien de Troyes. It probably dates from the 18th century, or at a push the 17th. " It may well have been painted, in relatively recent times, by a village *sorcerer* or a meditative shepherd, who was simply inspired by what he saw in the church: *the shroud*, for example, with its silver tears; or by some fresco adorning the wall of a chapel (a frieze of Greek crosses, a scattering of golden flames, etc.)"[42]. Moreover, other paintings of the same kind have since been discovered near the cave, in crevices in the rock,

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[40] A. Gadal, **De l'héritage des Cathares**, Ussat-les-Bains, 1980, published by the Rosicrucians of Haarlem, pp. 29 ff. In the middle of this booklet is a reproduction (*sic*) of the famous painting, entirely retouched and in colour. A reader concerned with objectivity will be able to see what the reality looks like thanks to the black-and-white photograph, fig. 14, opposite p. 129 of René Nelli's book, *Le phénomène cathare*, Toulouse, Privat, 1964. The comparison speaks for itself and proves that any means are acceptable to demonstrate the undemonstratable.

[41] I have discussed the theme of the three colours at length, with supporting quotations and references, in my book **Le Graal**, Paris, Retz, 1982, pp. 27–28. In this book, I have systematically analysed all versions of the Grail legend, and it becomes clear that they are all different.

[42] R. Nelli, *Le phénomène cathare*, p. 184.

style, with an even more pronounced ‘folkloric’ character. And one really needs a vivid imagination to see in this depiction Chrétien de Troyes’s description of the famous Procession of the Grail: the spear resembles more a 15th-century dagger; the cup is problematic, and the so-called Grail is more a solar disc schematising the head of Christ than a sacred vessel. As for the drops of blood, contrary to Chrétien de Troyes’s description, they do not appear to be flowing from the lance. We must, however, put things into perspective. Moreover, as René Nelli points out, if this painting did indeed depict the Grail, ‘that would not prove any more than that it is the work of a Cathar hand, *because there is not a single text allowing us to think that Catharism ever paid particular attention to the myths of the Grail*’.

So, one might rightly ask: why are the myths of the Grail so prominent in Cathar country, particularly at Ussat-les-Bains and Montségur?

The answer is clear and precise: because of confusing and incomplete information about the various versions of the Grail legend, particularly Wolfram von Eschenbach’s German version.

It is worth sketching out a little literary history and clarifying certain dates. The first text to mention the quest for the Grail, *without naming the marvellous object*, is an Occitan text, the *Roman de Jaufré*, dating from 1180: it is an Arthurian adventure in which the hero goes through all the stages of an initiatory quest. But the first text to name the mysterious Grail and to introduce the hero under the name of Perceval is that of Chrétien de Troyes, a poet from Champagne of Jewish origin, who wrote around 1190. This **Perceval, or the Tale of the Grail**, supposedly commissioned by the Count of Flanders, Philip of Alsace, is an unfinished work, no doubt intentionally so. Between 1190 and 1210, four different continuators provided a conclusion in several fragments, and an anonymous author saw fit to write a sort of preface to the whole, *the *Elucidation**.

Alongside this seminal collection of texts, around the same time – that is, around 1200 – a Welsh-language tale appeared, **Peredur**, which is far more archaic in tone: the hero's adventures are much the same as those of Perceval – who is called Peredur here – but the 'Grail' is not mentioned. Another text, in French, which shows a strong influence from Glastonbury Abbey, was written around 1195: this is the long novel entitled *Perlesvaux* – the name of the hero – and the Grail features prominently in it. All these texts can be classified as Franco-British and constitute an early version of the legend.

Another series of texts, written between 1200 and 1250, represent a more elaborate version, with a very different tone, and one that bears the unmistakable mark of Cistercian influence. These include Robert de Boron's *Joseph*, in which the synthesis of Celtic and biblical elements and the linking of the Grail theme to the Passion of Christ appear for the first time, followed by the strange tale known as *Didot-Perceval*, an adaptation of a lost poem by Robert de Boron, and finally the *Estoire du saint Graal* (an adaptation of *Joseph*) and the *Quête du saint Graal*, the latter two narratives forming part of what is known as the 'Lancelot in Prose', a vast corpus of Arthurian legends also known as the 'Vulgate Lancelot-Graal'. In *the Quest of the Holy Grail*, the discoverer of the Grail is no longer Perceval, but Galahad, son of Lancelot of Lac, a character with a "Christ-like" character, entirely crafted with a view to holiness as conceived by Cistercian theologians.

In none of these texts—whether the Franco-British versions or the Cistercian versions—can one find a single detail that links the theme of the Grail to Cathar doctrine, or locates the Castle of the Grail at Montségur or in Cathar country. But the same cannot be said of a third version of the legend, the one written by the German Wolfram von Eschenbach in his **Parzival** and also in his **Titurel**, two works dating from around 1210 and which might be

described as *the German-Iranian Grail*. Here, the connection with Catharism seems certain, and the highly specific details found in Wolfram's text provide a satisfactory explanation for the interest shown by the 'Northerners' in the Cathars, as well as for the location they proposed for the Grail Castle at Montségur.

Indeed, upon crossing the Rhine, the Grail theme underwent a development within the German context that was entirely distinct from its original Celtic framework. Admittedly, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* follows the plot of Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval* very closely, which is logical since the work in question is presented to us by the author as an adaptation, or even a translation in certain passages, of the French novel. But the details are far from consistent: there is even a profound rupture between the two works in terms of the spirit that animates them. What was a mythological legend inherited from the Celtic tradition and transposed, for the sake of the cause, by various French writers in accordance with the multiple aspects of the prevailing Christian ideology, has become a philosophical, even hermetic, work, in any case laden with fairly discernible esoteric elements.

Early 13th-century Germany was indeed a melting pot where seemingly contradictory influences clashed, yet from which a spirituality emerged that was far from orthodox, unlike the Cistercian spirituality of Saint Louis's time. German Illuminism was already taking shape in the poetry of the Minnesingers, as Richard Wagner so aptly captured in **Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg**, and the figure of Jacob Böhme was already emerging on the Germanic horizon. A taste for secret rites and initiations – into what exactly is unclear – was developing, giving rise to so-called secret societies where occultism became a veritable fashion. At the same time, the number of alchemists was steadily increasing, but their motivations were increasingly directed towards uncovering the great secrets of the universe through the Philosopher's Stone. And as this was the era of the

the Crusades, people brought back from the East not only spices and perfumes, but also traditions thought to have been forgotten, and the monastic orders created for the occasion, such as the Teutonic Knights , se comportent d'une façon très "corporate" manner: this leads to the formation of veritable initiatory societies where elements are drawn from Roman Christian spirituality as well as from that of the Eastern Churches, certain sects, or even Islam, and beyond that, from the currents that have stirred Asia Minor, Iran and the foothills of the Himalayas.

Wolfram von Eschenbach, who was probably from Bavaria, lived in the circle of Landgrave Hermann of Thuringia, in an environment that had always taken an interest in the occult. He wrote several unfinished works, but his **Parzival** takes the form of a long poem, the central part of which, by the author's own admission, is an adaptation of Chrétien de Troyes' **Perceval**. However, the Champagne-based novelist was not his sole source.

The entire opening of the work recounts the adventures of Perceval's father, a subject Chrétien de Troyes never touched upon. It is possible that Wolfram invented this himself in order to provide a preface to his hero's adventures, but other elements—notably the appearance of a half-brother of Parzival, the son of a European father and a Muslim mother, or the mention, in the final part of the poem, of Lohengrin, son of Parzival and founder of a lineage famous in history and legend (Godfrey of Bouillon), appear to have been borrowed from quite different sources, far removed from both Chrétien de Troyes and the Celtic archetype.

Wolfram, bowing to the fashion of the time which dictated that one should constantly refer to a predecessor, however imaginary, acknowledges that he drew inspiration from a model whom he, incidentally, contrasts with Chrétien de Troyes: 'Master Chrétien told this story, but altered it; and Kyôt, who handed down the true tale to us,

rightly resents [it43].” Throughout the work, Wolfram quotes this *Kyôt the Provençal* who “wrote in French”.

This detail may seem surprising, as a Provençal of the time could only have written in an Occitan dialect, not in French. Critics, arguing on the basis that Wolfram frequently mentions Provins en Brie, and on the very name of Kyôt—which may be the German spelling for Guyot or Guillot—have attempted to identify Wolfram’s mysterious informant with a well-known poet, Guiot de Provins, author of numerous poems and a satirical Bible that lacks neither verve nor ferocity. But this seems, above all, to be a coincidence.

It cannot be ruled out that this is a ruse on Wolfram’s part. Indeed, the name Guillot or Guyot is linked to the root **guille** (Anglo-Saxon **vile**, English **while**), an Old French word that has since disappeared and meant both ‘deception’ and ‘nonsense’. There are numerous examples in 12th- and 13th-century literature of wordplay between the term *guille* and the names Guillaume and its diminutives, including Guyot and Guillot. The most famous example is found in the 15th century in *La Farce de Maître Pathelin*, concerning the draper Guillaume, where the expression: ‘Does he take us for Guillaumes?’ simply means:
‘Does he take us for fools?’ One might also quote the famous proverb: ‘Some think they can outwit Guillot, but it is Guillot who outwits them’ (Littré). This means that Wolfram, at a time when the troubadours were happily practising *trobar dus*—that is to say, ‘camouflage’—and various wordplay, may very well be ‘taking us for fools’ with his reference to Kyôt the Provençal.

It is, however, difficult not to acknowledge the existence of a source other than Chrétien de Troyes for the composition of *Parzival*. Here is what Wolfram says on the matter: “Kyôt, the illustrious master, finds in Toledo, amongst abandoned manuscripts, the material for this story, recorded in writing

[43] Wolfram von Eschenbach, **Parzival**, trans. Ernest Tonnelat, Paris, Aubier-Montaigne, 1934, vol. II, p. 342. All quotations from Wolfram von Eschenbach’s work used here are taken from this translation by Ernest Tonnelat, which remains the best to date.

Arabic. First he had to learn to distinguish the letters A, B, C (the elements of magical writing, according to Wolfram), but he made no attempt to learn black magic. It was a great advantage for him to have been baptised; for otherwise this story would have remained unknown. 'For there is no pagan wise enough to reveal to us the nature of the Grail and tell us how its secret virtues were known' (trans. Tonnelat, II, p. 23).

In short, for Wolfram, the original framework of the quest and, above all, the great secrets of the Grail have a specific origin and come from the East via an Arabic manuscript. And numerous details throughout the narrative seem to support this assertion of an Eastern source, for these details are neither Celtic nor borrowed from Chrétien de Troyes.

First of all, there is the wound of Anfortas, the Fisher-King (whose name, incidentally, derives from the Latin **infirmitas**, whereas in French texts he is called Pellès, a name taken from the Celtic deity Pwyll Penn Annwfn). Wolfram tells us that the king's wound was unbearable when the weather turned cold. He is the only one to provide this detail. And when Parzival heals him, he clearly appears in the guise of Indra, who, when the Aryans occupied the Nordic lands before migrating to the Indus Valley, was regarded as *the god who melts the frost*, and thus a regenerative solar deity.

The Fisher-King himself can be regarded as the equivalent of an Indian mythological figure. The golden fish is thus the first incarnate manifestation of Vishnu as creator, a symbol that merges with the image of *the ichthys* of the early Christians, representing Jesus as both man and god. In Tibetan Buddhist speculation, the golden fish symbolises creatures immersed in the ocean of *samsara*—that is to say, the infernal cycle of reincarnations—who must be led by the Fisherman to the light of Liberation. This theme is, moreover, very close to Cathar doctrine: it concerns the awakening of the angelic soul imprisoned within

matter and which, under the guidance of a Perfect One, will return to the path of the original Light.

In Wolfram's text, and nowhere else, Parzival's father sets off to fight in the East, near Baghdad, and it is there that he is killed. But he had a son there, *Vairefils* (sometimes spelled Feirefils), whose name means 'grey son', with whom Parzival will undertake part of his adventures. There is much to be said about the presence of this Vairefils alongside the hero, and about his fundamental ambiguity: as the child of a European father and a Muslim mother, he ought simply to have a dark complexion; yet he is always described as 'black and white', and seems, in the author's mind, to embody the dualistic principle in concrete form. In any case, the Eastern reference appears particularly clear here.

Wolfram sets some of Gauvain's adventures in the magical palace of *Klinschor*, or Klingsor, a character who would later take on extraordinary significance in Richard Wagner's opera. However, Klingsor's palace, meticulously described by Wolfram, bears a striking resemblance to the description one might give of the Buddhist monasteries of Kabulistan, and especially of the palace of Kapisa, with its fantastical throne on wheels, comparable to the Bed of Wonder. There is no doubt that the author was fully aware of the Eastern model that served as the backdrop to the story he was telling.

In **Parzival**, the Grail Castle – which is not named in Chrétien's work, but is called Corbénic in the Cistercian **Quest** – is known as *Munsalvasche*, or Montsalvage. The meaning is 'Wild Mountain' or 'Mountain of Salvation'. But what is very strange is that Wolfram provides us with a fairly detailed description of it, and it is impossible not to compare this description with that of *the Manichaean citadels* of northern Persia, in particular the fortress of *Ruh-I-Sal-Schwâdeha*, on Lake Hamun, in Sista, on the border between Iran and Afghanistan. Now, given that *Ruh-I* means 'mountain', is Montsalvage not the exact equivalent of *Ruh-I-Sal-Schwâdeha*, on the

phonetic, at the very least? It is a far too precise resemblance to be due to chance, and one which seems to indicate a *Manichaean influence* on the *Parzival* narrative.

That said, it is impossible to equate Montsalvage with Montségur. The only connection lies between the first two words of each name. But one can better understand why it is chiefly the Germans who are keen to identify Montségur as the Castle of the Grail. Be that as it may, Wolfram's text is not unrelated to the Cathars.

In the *Parzival*, and in this account to the exclusion of all others, the Grail is a precious stone upon which a dove—identified with the Holy Spirit—sometimes alights. This stone is called, at least according to Wolfram, *lapsit exillis*, which may need to be corrected to *lapis exillis*, *lapis* meaning 'stone' in Latin. It is now widely accepted that Wolfram, who had a competent but limited command of the French language, made numerous mistranslations when rendering Chrétien de Troyes's narrative (the most famous of these concerns the *'tailloir'*, which he interpreted as *'knives'*, whereas it is in fact a carving board). The following explanation has therefore been proposed for the replacement of the vase containing the blood of Christ, or the simple vessel mentioned by Chrétien, with a precious stone: Wolfram may have mistaken the precious stones adorning Chrétien's Grail for the Grail itself. This explanation is hardly satisfactory, for the entire context in Wolfram's narrative justifies the choice of a stone. Firstly, there is an alchemical allusion, as *'lapis exillis'* is very close to *'lapis elixir*', terms by which the Arabs referred to the Philosopher's Stone. Secondly, the Grail stone, of celestial origin, irresistibly evokes the stone of the Ka'aba in Mecca, and many other stories of this kind, in particular the tradition that the Grail was carved into the shape of a vessel from a gigantic emerald that fell from Lucifer's forehead during the

his rebellion and his **fall**[44]. Here, the theme bears a resemblance to Catharism: the stone could symbolise what remains pure and angelic in the human soul after its imprisonment in matter. Indeed, on this subject, René Nelli has suggested that *'lapis exillis'* might be a corruption of *'lapis e cœlis'*, that is to say 'stone (fallen) from the heavens'. This hypothesis seems quite **compelling**[45].

Moreover, Wolfram's Grail-Stone bears a striking resemblance to the famous Manichaean jewel, adopted by Buddhist tradition: the *padma mani* found at the heart of the lotus, which is the solar symbol of Liberation. It is also found in Hindu traditions concerning the Tree of Life. It is also the Iranian *Chwarna* mentioned in *the Avesta*, a magical and multifaceted object 'which causes rivers to spring from their sources, plants to grow from the earth, which causes the wind to drive the clouds, which brings forth mankind, which guides the moon and the stars in their course'. Wolfram's Grail-Stone possesses the same qualities as the *Chwarna*. Furthermore, upon this Mazdean stone alights a dove bringing a seed of *Hanna*: yet upon the Grail-Stone, the dove brings a host on Good Friday, as if by chance the day of the resurrection of the northern sun. And what of the Buddhist paintings depicting the Divine Virgin bearing the jewel *that bestows joy*? In Wolfram's work, the young girl who carries the Grail is called *Repanse del Schoie*, meaning 'Repense of Joy'. All these accumulated details constitute precise facts, not ingenious hypotheses. We must admit that Wolfram von Eschenbach consciously and deliberately transformed Chrétien de Troyes' 'vessel' into *a Stone fallen from Heaven*, whose meaning and functions refer to

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[44] Not to mention the Celtic reference to the Stone of Tara in Ireland, which is the royal stone, the coronation stone: it would cry out when a future King of Ireland sat upon it, thus designating the one destined for the throne. This is reminiscent, incidentally, of the 'perilous seat' in the Cistercian version of the Grail legend.

[45] Another hypothesis would be to interpret this *lapis exillis* as a 'stone of exile' (*exillis* being an adjective), which would naturally lead us back to Cathar doctrine.

undoubtedly to an Eastern, Mazdean tradition, from which Catharism drew its inspiration.

But there are many other parallels.

First and foremost is the obsession with purity, a trait shared by *Parzival* and Catharism. Although the hero is neither a virgin nor chaste (except in Wagner's opera), he is nonetheless on a quest for absolute purity. This purity, which is, moreover, difficult to attain, was merely 'naivety' in Chrétien's Perceval. But for Parzival, it is a conscious pursuit, and it enables him to pass through all the stages of initiation and become the undisputed King of the Grail. And his son Lohengrin will continue this quest; he, the Knight of the Swan—a highly symbolic animal, incidentally—who must part from his wife, the Duchess of Brabant, because she has transgressed the terrible taboo concerning her name and origins. When one is pure, one has no need of a name. And purity leads to Perfection, the supreme goal of Cathar asceticism. The King of the Grail has reached this stage: he has definitively resolved the good-evil dilemma by denying evil. It is the victory of Ahura-Mazda over Ahriman, of God over Satan, of the Sun over Darkness. As for the 'bearer of the Grail', she bears no resemblance to Chrétien's nameless maiden, nor to the unsettling, androgynous and multifaceted empress of the Welsh tale of *Peredur*, nor to Elaine, the daughter of Pellès in the *Prose Lancelot*, who unites with Lancelot to father Galahad. Repense de Joie is chaste. She is pure. She may die, but she will rise from her ashes like the Phoenix.

This is the question Parzival must ask in order to heal the wounded Fisher-King. In other versions, the hero must enquire about the mysteries of the Grail. Parzival must simply ask: 'King, what ails you?' This is the ideal of compassion, inherited from a distant Buddhism, and through which souls may finally awaken, free themselves from their bodily prison, and attain the ecstatic joys of non-existence in the Kingdom of Light. The ritual described here by Wolfram is certainly not Christian. Nor is it Celtic. It is unquestionably Cathar and recalls the *consolamentum*.

When Parzival heals the Fisher King, the latter does not die, as in other versions of the legend. On the contrary, Anfortas is rejuvenated and devotes himself to the service of the Grail. He, who had been wounded in his sexual parts because he had taken too much pleasure in them, finds himself suddenly regenerated by Parzival the Pure, and transcends his *libido* through acts *of wonder* for others.

It is in this light that we must examine the figure of Esclarmonde from the legends of the Pyrenees, particularly in the Montségur region. She is the *White Lady*, a fusion of the ancient goddess of springs and the historical figure of Esclarmonde de Foix, who was burned at the stake during the massacre of 1244. On certain occasions, Esclarmonde emerges from the lake where she dwells and wanders along the walls of Montségur. And not far from there, in Montferrier, a curious tale is told, similar to a legend from **Wales**: A peasant had married a fairy who granted him everything he desired. But she had forbidden her husband to call *her* '*fado*', meaning both 'fairy' and 'madwoman'. Naturally, one day the peasant broke the ban, and the fairy flew away in the form of a dove. The peasant then realised that she returned every day whilst he was away: but as soon as he entered the house, his fairy wife vanished in the form of a **dove**.[47] We recognise in this story the Melusine-like prohibition, but the fairy, instead of being a snake-woman like Melusine, is a bird-woman, as in Norse traditions. What is more, she is a dove-woman. We know that doves carved from soft stone or ceramic have been found in the Montségur region, including one at Ussat-les-Bains and two at Montségur **itself**. One cannot help but think of the dove which, every Good Friday, brings a host to the Grail Stone, but

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[46] J. Markale, *The Celtic Epic in Brittany*, Paris, Payot, 3rd ed., 1985, pp. 273–276. This refers to the 'Legend of Llyn y Fan', elements of which are found in the Languedoc tale of 'the Montagne Noire' (J. Markale, *Contes occitans,* pp. 223–233), but in that version, the young girl is a duck-woman.

[47] Adelin Moulis, *Beliefs, Superstitions and Customs in the County of Foix*, Verniolle (Ariège), 1975, pp. 12–14.

[48] R. Nelli, *The Cathar Phenomenon*, pp. 162–164.

also to the representation of the Holy Spirit in the Cathar tradition, and furthermore to the Huguenot cross, which surmounts a dove, all linked to the dove bringing an olive branch to Noah on the Ark. These are revealing parallels.

Wolfram also claims that the manuscript discovered in Toledo by Kyôt le Provençal was written by a certain Flégétanis, a Jew descended from Solomon, but whose father was Arab. Is this a veiled allusion to Chrétien de Troyes's Jewish heritage? The name Flégétanis is yet another play on words. It is "the clumsy transcription of Falak-Thani, an Arabic expression denoting the second heaven, that of Mercury-Hermes, placed under the invocation of the 'messenger of the gods with St. Aïssa', that is to say, Jesus. This second heaven… governs spiritual life and knowledge"[49]. Wolfram shows little kindness towards Flégétanis, who "worshipped a calf in which he saw a god". This points to a taurobolic cult of the Mithraic type. But "he could predict the disappearance of every star and the moment of its return". Wolfram portrays him as an astrologer: yet this is an image relating to the transmigration of souls, which is still consistent with Cathar beliefs.

There is more. 'There was,' he said, 'an object called the Grail. He had clearly read its name in the stars. A host of angels had placed it upon the earth, then flown far beyond the stars. These angels were too pure to remain here below' (trans. Tonnelat, II, p. 24). These angels carry a curious Cathar connotation. Wolfram further claims that Flégétanis, who was a pagan, understood nothing of this story, whereas Kyôt the Provençal, who was a Christian, upon witnessing the angels' departure, realised that the Grail must have been entrusted to men 'who had become Christians through baptism and were as pure as angels'. It was then that "Kyôt, the wise master, searched the Latin books to find where a people pure enough might have lived and

[49] Albert Ollivier, *Les Templiers*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1958, p. 72.

'…quite inclined to a life of renunciation in order to become the guardian of the Grail. He read the chronicles of the kingdoms of Britain, France and Ireland, and many others besides, until he found in Anjou what he was seeking' (trans. Tonnelat, II, p. 25). This is where it becomes significant.

The reference to Anjou relates to the Plantagenet dynasty, rulers of Great Britain and protectors of Armoricaine Brittany, but also propagators of the Arthurian legends and the myth of the Grail, who sought to make Glastonbury both the mythical island of Avalon and the Castle of the Grail. The predominance of the three countries—Brittany, France and Ireland—indicates, according to Wolfram, a clear Celtic influence on the Grail theme. But what are we to make of this people, pure enough to replace the angels in their role as guardians of the Grail? Are they the Cathars? The Templars? Or some other *chosen and pure* people? It is worth noting that there is no reference here to Germania, but given this elitist evocation, one should no longer be surprised by the particular destiny of this version of the quest, its heretical connotations and, above all, its subsequent extensions towards an Aryan mysticism: the guardians of the Grail, whoever they may be—Templars, Cathars or others—will become the fierce upholders of a necessary racial purity, immediately casting aside, or even coldly eliminating, all heterogeneous elements *not admitted to the mysteries of the Grail*.

Yet Wolfram von Eschenbach's tale apparently follows the same pattern as that used by Chrétien de Troyes. Parzival, 'son of the Widowed Lady', one day leaves his mother to be knighted at Arthur's court. He experiences much the same adventures as Perceval – and as the Welsh Peredur: he enters the Grail Castle, witnesses the famous Grail procession, asks no questions, learns the truth about the Grail and redoubles his efforts to find the mysterious castle and heal the Fisher King. And like Perceval, he receives instruction from a hermit who turns out to be one of his maternal uncles.

This hermit is named Trévrizent in Wolfram's work. Whilst Chrétien de Troyes merely has him utter platitudes to Perceval, it seems that Wolfram took the opportunity to load his discourse with an incredible number of ideas, some of which are even contradictory. Trévrizent appears as an initiator: he narrates, he explains, and he also lies (by his own admission).

He first develops the theme, already explored in the Cistercian quest, of the replacement of the tenth legion of Angels (Lucifer and the rebels) by the human race: Adam is clearly presented as Lucifer's replacement. And one constantly discovers in Trévrizent's discourse a more or less veiled reference to the Light. Thus,

"Thought can escape the gaze of the sun; thought, though no lock confines it, remains hidden, impenetrable to every creature; thought is the darkness into which no light penetrates. But the divine has the power to illuminate all things; its radiance shines through the wall of darkness that envelops it…" These reflections seem to be in keeping with Cathar doctrine: the human being, locked within their own thoughts since the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, waits for a ray of divine light to come and awaken them. And this divine ray may well be the Grail.

Trévrizent does indeed reveal to Parzival what the Grail is, but he does so in relation to those who guard the sacred Object, namely the Knights Templar, 'who often ride far afield in search of adventure. Whatever the outcome of their battles, glory or humiliation, they accept it with a calm heart, as atonement for their sins'. Why the Knights Templar? From a German author, one might well have expected him to speak of a German order, such as the Teutonic Knights. It seems that by the time Wolfram was writing, almost a century before the condemnation of the Templars, they had acquired a reputation not only as excellent fighters, but as keepers of secrets and upholders of a

of a somewhat mysterious nature. And it is then that Wolfram goes on to describe the Grail, something Chrétien de Troyes had not done:

'Everything they (the Knights Templar) live on comes from a precious stone, which in its essence is pure in every way. If you do not know it, I shall tell you its name: it is called *Lapsit exillis*. It is by the virtue of this stone that the phoenix is consumed and turns to ash; but from these ashes life is reborn; it is thanks to this stone that the phoenix undergoes its moulting to reappear afterwards in all its splendour, as beautiful as ever. There is no man so ill that, placed in the presence of this stone, he is not assured of escaping death for the entire week following the day he saw it. Whoever sees it ceases to age. From the day this stone appears to them, all women and men regain the appearance they had in the days when they were in the prime of their strength. If they were in the presence of the stone for two hundred years, they would not change; only their hair would turn white. This stone gives man such vigour that his bones and flesh immediately regain their youth. It is also known as the Grail" (trans. Tonnelat, II, p. 36).

All this naturally brings to mind the many Feasts of Immortality described in various mythologies, and in particular the 'Feast of Bran's Head' in the Welsh *Mabinogi* tradition, all the more so as, in the tale of *Peredur*, the Grail appears in the form of a severed head on a **platter**. But Wolfram's Stone has a distinctly alchemical resonance – it is the Philosopher's Stone, the supreme goal of the operations of the Great Work, that is to say, a quest that is both spiritual and material, which, starting from a raw material, leads to the creation of a purified substance full of power. It is perfect knowledge of the great secrets of the world; it is also a 'universal medicine' and, as such, confers quasi-immortality.

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50 J. Markale, *The Celtic Epic in Britain*, pp. 51–53.

However, Wolfram writes for a Christian audience, or at the very least within the constraints of a Christian society. Somewhat alarmed by the heretical or pagan nature of what he has just described, he imbues it with a Christian slant: 'Every Good Friday, (a dove) comes to bestow upon the stone the power to provide the finest of drinks and the finest of dishes… Paradise offers nothing more delightful… The stone also provides its guardians with game of all kinds." If we understand correctly, the guardians of the Grail enjoy a privileged and *enviable* position: who would not wish to be part of this elite cohort?

Precisely, Wolfram turns to the selection and recruitment of the Grail's guardians: "On the edge of the stone, a mysterious inscription appears, stating the name and lineage of those—young boys or maidens—who are chosen to undertake this blessed journey. To remove this inscription, there is no need to scratch it away, for it vanishes from the sight of the beholder as soon as they have read the name. The chosen ones are sought out from the most diverse lands" (trans. Tonnelat, II, pp. 37–38).

In other words, the brotherhood of the Guardians of the Grail is a truly closed society: these guardians are chosen in a mysterious and *magical manner*. They are the *chosen ones*, but they do not *apply* for this role, and what remains unknown are the criteria governing their selection. But it is clear that these words attributed to the hermit Trévrizent have played a major part in making the Grail the linchpin of a secret society reserved for initiates who *are called but not volunteers*. Richard Wagner, by taking up Wolfram's themes, further emphasised this aspect of the Templars as guardians of the Grail, hence the ambiguous nature of his *Parsifal* and the notoriety the work gained in Nazi circles. For, on reflection, the brotherhood of the Grail's guardians could very well serve as an esoteric model for other brotherhoods. One cannot help but think of the Thule Society and its offshoots in Germany *and elsewhere*. It would also be worth asking certain questions about the famous 'Ballad of the

'King of Thule', who, let us not forget, is in possession of a *golden cup*. The Grail is linked to the idea of blood, since in certain versions the cup contains the blood of Christ. But in Wolfram's account, given that the Grail is a stone, the idea of blood lies elsewhere: in the purity of the Grail's guardians, who constitute an initiatory lineage bound by a sort of blood brotherhood, but of pure blood, free from any racial admixture. The
Hitlerian SS is not far off, and this would explain the interest shown by the Nazis – Otto Rahn foremost among them – in the traditions that placed the Grail at Montségur, in Cathar country, that is to say, among the 'Pure Ones'.

Let us not forget that Hitler's aim was not to preserve the race, but to create a new one, entirely pure, through a kind of biological mutation that only true Aryans were capable of bringing about. And, in Hitler's thinking, it was the SS that was to form this unrivalled elite. Today, there is too great a tendency to view the SS solely in terms of its policing role. It has many other connotations: the SS was, above all, a religious and esoteric *order*, highly hierarchical, with very precise rules and particularly stringent recruitment criteria. 'In the upper echelons (of the Nazi regime) were the leaders of a secret Order, the existence of which was, incidentally, never officially recognised by the National Socialist government. Even within the party itself, there was talk of those who were
"part of the inner circle", but no legal designation was ever given. It seems certain that the doctrine, which was never fully articulated, was based on an absolute belief in powers transcending ordinary human **capabilities"[51]**. We know where this led in terms of racial research, the construction of a new world according to criteria dating back to the dawn of time, in terms of the elimination of races deemed inferior, on the plan of the

[51] Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, *Le matin des magiciens*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960, p. 358.

biological research carried out on humans and reaching the highest degrees of aberration.

We also know that Hitler's dream collapsed under a deluge of fire in May 1945. All of this has become a nightmare, the final throes of which we are desperately trying to quell. But the dream of which Hitler was the linchpin was not confined solely to the structure of the National Socialist state. It existed *elsewhere*, and that *elsewhere* was not destroyed by the collapse of the Third Reich, since, officially, it was not part of it. It must be understood that the Black Order still exists, and that it is present *elsewhere* – in Brocéliande, of course, but also at Montségur, in Ussat-les-Bains and in the vicinity of Rennes-le-Château. The Black Order remains as passionate as ever about the Cathars and the Grail. This Grail is, more than ever, the Stone that grants all powers. And the Black Order, whatever the sceptics may say, are the heirs to a tradition upheld by the strange guardians of the Grail described in **Parzival**[52].

Let us listen to the German poet: 'In this castle dwells a noble brotherhood. Those who belong to it have fought valiantly to prevent men from all lands from approaching the Grail, save those whom the inscription at Montsalvage designates to enter the holy company' (trans. Tonnelat, II, p. 39). When Parzival went to Montsalvage for the first time, his name had not yet been read on the stone. That is why he did not ask the question: 'What

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[52] We must be clear about terminology: the reference to a 'Black Order' in no way implies that the members of this Order practise *black* magic or engage in practices automatically classified as evil or satanic. Firstly, there is no such thing as *black* or *white* magic, but simply magic. Secondly, the term 'Black Order' refers to the SS uniform, which was one of the most visible manifestations of this Black Order, but *certainly not the only one*: to understand this, one must look back far beyond the Hitler era and realise that the SS was merely an epiphenomenon, regrettable though it was, but temporary. Finally, to speak of a 'Black Order' means that this general term encompasses numerous so-called 'philosophical' societies whose main characteristic is that they are unofficial, obscure, and therefore 'black'. This 'Black Order', which has always existed and persists to this day, is visible only in appearances, most of the time quite innocuous. The key is to know what one wants, without getting bogged down in considerations that smack of petty Manichaeism.

‘Are you suffering?’ When he is driven from the castle following this failure, an invisible squire cries out to him: ‘May the hatred of the sun fall upon you!’ These are indeed strange words: what is the meaning of this rather unchristian curse, whose Zoroastrian reference seems obvious? Does this mean that Parzival, by failing to ask the question, has not awakened, and that his soul still slumbers in the darkness of matter where the Sun cannot penetrate? Here we are faced with an element that would suffice to definitively classify Wolfram’s text as a Cathar work.

In his speech to Parzival, Trévrizent speaks of Anfortas’s wound. It might indeed seem surprising that the sight of the Holy Grail heals everyone, at least for a week, but not the man most concerned: the King of the Grail, Anfortas. A curse weighs upon Anfortas. He is wounded and crippled ‘because in his quest for love, he failed to respect chastity’. This seems strange. What, then, is this quest for love? Perhaps it is a form of love ‘platonic’, a transcendence of physical love? What we know of the *Fine Amor*, upon closer examination, does little to support this view: the *Fine Amor*, better known as *courtly love*, is neither ‘platonic’ nor chaste; it is above all a *quest for love* with an initiatory character and very precise rules, the main one being that a knight or a lady must never love someone below their rank, on pain of disgrace. Yet, according to Trévrizent’s discourse, ‘the King of the Grail who seeks the love of a woman other than the one whose name appeared on the stone is doomed to harsh atonement… His battle cry was “Amor!”… In single combat, he was wounded in his manhood by a poisoned spear”, and this was because he dared to love a woman who was not accepted by the Grail, and therefore by the community of the Grail’s guardians. He has fallen from grace. That is why Anfortas is wounded and cannot be healed by any medicine. He can only be delivered by the knight who asks him the question: ‘What ails you?’ Then he will be forced to answer and *confess his sin*. His healing is linked to a confession that nullifies his guilt, which causes him

to regain the angelic state he possessed before the Fall. All this remains entirely consistent with Cathar doctrine. And when Kundry the Witch, messenger of the Grail, announces to Parzival that his name has appeared on the Stone, she says: 'An inscription has appeared on the stone, commanding that you become King of the Grail. Condwiramur, your wife, and your son Lohengrin are summoned to the Grail Castle at the same time as you.' Kundry therefore takes great care to specify that Parzival's wife is approved: he will not risk falling from grace by loving a woman unworthy of him. And Kundry begins to ramble astrologically, giving the stars their Arabic names, which "were known to the noble and wealthy Vairefils, who, black and white all at once, sat beside her" (trans. Tonnelat, II, pp. 298–299).

Now everything is in place. Parzival has broken the spells cast by Klingsor, the evil double of Anfortas, whose castle is a false Montsalvage. We learn that Klingsor is a former Duke of Mantua, who was castrated by a king whose wife he had seduced. His wound is incurable, and he has devoted himself to magic in order to take revenge on other men for the affront he suffered. He brings to mind Cronus, castrated and chained by Zeus. And indeed, it is not Parzival, but Gawain—as appears in the Welsh *Peredur*—who, as a true sun god, illuminates the shadowy areas of Klingsor's castle, awakens those who slumber, frees the knights held captive there, and thus prepares the way for Parzival.

It is only after all these adventures that Parzival is able to ask Anfortas the question. Anfortas answers, and is healed. Parzival is crowned King of the Grail. His brother Vairefils marries Repense de Joie, the bearer of the Grail, and sets off with her for the East: they will have a son who will become the famous Priest John, founder of a fabulous kingdom in the region of Ethiopia. As for Parzival's son, Lohengrin – more precisely 'Lorrain Garin', the hero of several chansons de geste – he would become the famous 'Knight of the Swan' and the mythical ancestor of Godfrey of Bouillon as well as the Dukes of Lorraine, of whom the Guise family are the

descendants, eternal claimants to the French crown. It is as though Wolfram von Eschenbach sought to establish a royal and divine lineage through the symbol of the Grail.

But the lesson to be drawn from this vast and complex work is that access to the mysterious castle of Montsalvage is not attained through personal asceticism, as appears to be the case in other versions of the legend. It is through a choice that does not depend on the hero that one is admitted to Montsalvage, through a sort of co-optation disguised as a miracle inscribed in stone.

There is a very clear tendency here towards fanatical elitism, towards the exaltation of a chosen race, selected by God – or by the Devil! – to fulfil a sacred mission that is not merely the guardianship of the Grail, but the regeneration of humanity.

By what means? It is all there.

The Grail, let us repeat, is a 'vessel', even when it appears in the form of a stone. And it contains *blood*. Now, according to Hebrew belief, blood is the vehicle of the soul. This is a very ancient idea, one that has never been abandoned: in Indo-European traditions, it does not take such a direct form, but it is recognisable in the concept of an elite body, a sacred lineage, which must maintain its original purity amidst the vicissitudes of the satanic world, even if it means cutting itself off from ordinary mortals and fighting fiercely to survive. Thus, by following Wolfram's work into its furthest corners, one can see strange initiatory patterns taking shape, in which the primordial element remains *blood*—blood whose purity must be preserved. It is here that the myth of the Grail meets the Cathar myth. But we then realise that the Grail is not an object at all, and that the Cathars' Treasure is far from being material.

Wolfram von Eschenbach also composed a poem entitled *Titurel*. This poem comprises one hundred and seventy stanzas and purports to outline the main lines of the Grail lineage. The work is unfinished, obscure and even more laden

than **Parzival** in terms of esotericism. It is nonetheless revealing of the aim Wolfram was pursuing.

Titurel is the name of the first King of the Grail. Wolfram endeavours to demonstrate that there exists a Grail *race*. He recounts the love affair between Sigune, Parzival's cousin, and a certain Shionatulander. These two characters are presented as perfect examples of the Grail race, that elite seed which God himself has sown amongst the knights. And it would appear that this elite race is entirely free from mystical or merely religious concerns. There is no question of any salvation in an Otherworld. The concept of sin is entirely absent from their minds. In reality, God asks of these Chosen Ones only that they ensure the triumph of strength and courage in battle, of beauty and loyalty in love, and this in absolute fullness. " The entire company of the Grail is made up of Chosen Ones who are ever favoured by fortune in this world and the next, ever counted among those whose glory is enduring (stanza 44). Wherever this seed was carried from the land of the Grail, it was granted to bear fruit and to spare those who gathered it from the scourge of dishonour" (stanza 45)[53].

These lines were written in the 13th century. They are unsettling in that they bear a striking resemblance to certain discourses from the first half of the 20th century. But they explain, better than any lengthy commentary, why the proponents of certain schools of thought – of German origin – made such good use of the Grail theme as revised and amended by Wolfram von Eschenbach, and why they were so keen to find a *real* location for the Grail Castle: through the mist of Cathar tradition, Montségur, identified with Montsalvage, appeared as the ideal location not for discovering some sacred object, but for serving as the hub of a large-scale outward-reaching endeavour. Montségur, the North Pole

[53] *Titurel*, trans. Jean Fourquet, *Lumière du Graal*, Marseille, *Cahiers du Sud*, 1951, p. 243.

symbolic of a new humanity governed by the guardians of the Grail…

We are thus far removed from the original version of the Grail as it appears in Celtic texts, where the Grail is an inexhaustible cauldron of abundance and inspiration; far also from the Chalice containing the blood of Jesus, the 'Precious Blood' shed for the salvation of the world, *of everyone*; far, finally, from the Cathar vision of the Fallen Angels who seek to recover the Lost Light, yet know that nothing can be done so long as a single soul remains to be saved.

There is betrayal, a threefold betrayal. First, a betrayal of peaceful Celtic metaphysics. Next, a betrayal of the message of love of Jesus Christ. Finally, a betrayal of the Cathar vision of a world reconciled with itself.

The question arises: why this betrayal, why this co-opting? Montségur must harbour some occult power, given that it is the focus of so many divergent fantasies, so many contradictory quests, and so many double-edged delusions. Ultimately, it is no more absurd for the mind to *visualise* the Grail in the keep of Montségur than to find it in Brocéliande or in Glastonbury Abbey. The problem is that we still do not know the true nature of the Grail.

VI

ROYAL BLOOD

What continues to capture the imagination is the escape of the four Parfaits from Montségur, prior to the fortress's surrender and the burning at the stake of the two hundred and five 'heretics'. Given the resignation – and even the serene joy – of the Cathars who perished at the stake, it is inconceivable that these four Perfect Ones would have thus escaped the ordeal without a compelling reason that transcended them and involved the entire Cathar community. If they 'fled' from Montségur, it was to safeguard *something* that must not fall into the hands of the Inquisitors, nor into those of the soldiers of the royal army. And as we have no indication of the true nature of this deposit, anything is conceivable: the least likely explanation being that of a material treasure. It is indeed difficult to imagine four men, even hardened ones who knew the terrain well, carrying a heavy load across precipices and goat tracks.

In any case, the route taken by the four Parfaits is no better known. Several routes have been suggested, along with a number of possible stopping points. There has been talk of Usson Castle, the caves of Ussat and Ornolac, and the Razès region. What does any of this matter? They did not stay there, and even if we assume they reached a safe hiding place for their 'treasure', time has passed, and treasure hunters risk many disappointments if they take everything said on the subject at face value. The problem is not so much knowing where the Cathars hid the

‘treasure’ they took with them, but rather to discover what they had taken.

A clarification is in order. From time to time, people who appear to be well-meaning stir up public interest by loudly proclaiming that they are in possession of secret documents, or that they have, quite by chance, been given access to secret documents. Firstly, they are careful not to produce any of these secret documents, or, if they do so only after much persuasion, it soon becomes apparent that these documents are forgeries: fabricated or backdated accounts, charters and genealogies concocted from scratch, unverifiable testimonies, drawings or paintings that are imitations or forgeries, quotations truncated or distorted by being taken out of context, and many other deceptions of all kinds.

When we are presented with *secret* documents, the natural first reaction is to be wary. The very nature of *secret* documents is, after all, that they are *secret*. That should be reason enough to dismiss them out of hand, even if it causes their discoverers a great deal of distress. Moreover, simple common sense should prompt us to consider the following point: when one wishes to keep something secret, one takes great care not to leave any tangible, legible clues. Any reader of spy novels knows this: a secret is passed on orally, very rarely in written form, and in such cases, one does not leave anything lying about; one destroys what has been written. So, spare us these ‘miraculously recovered’ secret documents that conveniently support a hypothesis for which one can hardly argue on the basis of mere conjecture. In the realm of the so-called occult sciences, this is even truer than in the realm of history proper: and yet, archivists know full well that a large part of their material, piously preserved, consists of forgeries fabricated from scratch over the ages and according to circumstances.

In the case of the four Cathars who escaped from Montségur, the most logical and plausible hypothesis would be to

assume that they had a mission to fulfil, that this mission consisted of passing on a certain number of secret instructions to specific individuals. They must have accomplished this mission: they passed on what needed to be passed on, and they took great care not to leave any traces that might have been recovered and deciphered by agents of the Inquisition or the royal authorities. That is all.

But this in no way prevents us from drawing connections between troubling or unexplained facts, making comparisons, and ultimately forming hypotheses.

The troubling fact is the interest that the kings of France have always shown in Cathar country, and the Razès in particular, after having done everything in their power to destroy the Cathar heresy and take possession of the region. And this fact must be viewed, on the one hand, in relation to the Capetian monarchy's relentless persecution of the unfortunate Trencavel – even though he has nothing to do with Perceval! – and, on the other hand, with the leniency shown by Blanche of Castile towards Raymond VII, Count of Toulouse, a great protector of heretics and a great treacherous vassal according to feudal custom. It is perhaps no coincidence that the legends of the Razès constantly mention a White Queen, who is, incidentally, conflated with the fairy-tale figure of the White Lady of the Pyrenees, and that the so-called treasure discovered by Abbé Saunière in the supposedly Visigothic—but in reality Carolingian—pillar of his church was described as 'Treasure of Blanche of Castile'.

The most likely hypothesis, then, might be as follows: Blanche of Castile knew that Raymond VII, Trencavel and no doubt some of their vassals were in possession of documents or oral traditions concerning the French monarchy. And it is likely that these documents or traditions had been passed on by the Cathars, or at least within Cathar circles by clerics or figures who could use them to engage in a form of blackmail.

Another troubling fact is the clear connection – supported by the texts themselves, as we have seen – between the Cathars and the version

of the Grail according to the German Wolfram von Eschenbach. In the 13th century, certain German intellectual circles, deeply steeped in occultism, were convinced that there was a link between the Cathar heretics and the guardians of the Grail, and that consequently the Grail might be a Cathar 'talisman'. This idea, which had fallen somewhat into obscurity, was revived at the end of the 19th century by German intellectuals and French occult circles, and was widely echoed thereafter.

The hypothesis here is as follows: the Grail, which, since Chrétien de Troyes, has become an ideological symbol appropriated by various schools of thought, offers a link to the Cathars' 'Treasure'—in other words, to documents or traditions concerning the French monarchy. It is known that the epic cycle of the Chansons de Geste, comprising numerous legends about Charlemagne, constitutes a sort of mythological justification for the Capetian monarchy, the legitimate heir to the Carolingian dynasty. It is known that the entire body of Round Table romances constitutes a similar mythological justification for the Plantagenet dynasty – supposedly the heir to the legendary King Arthur. But the Grail cycle, which nevertheless belongs to the Arthurian corpus, highlights a parallel royal line, a secret dynasty traced back to King David.

Royal and princely families have always prided themselves on having an exceptional ancestor, and when they lacked one, they would either contrive to link themselves artificially to a figure from the past or invent a mythological figure to explain their origins. Thus, in Rome, the *gens Julia*, to which Julius Caesar belonged, claimed descent from the Trojan Aeneas, and therefore from the goddess Venus. In France, the Lusignans linked themselves to the fairy Melusine, and the Plantagenets themselves claimed to be the descendants of an Angevin fairy before linking themselves to King Arthur. As for the Merovingians, the 'long-haired kings', strange stories were told about them concerning the birth, and above all the conception, of Merovech. When Merovech's mother, a woman

King Clodion's daughter, was pregnant; she had gone swimming in the ocean; and there, it is said, she was seduced by a water creature
'from beyond the seas' who is said to have impregnated her a second time. Thus, Meroveus is said to have had 'two fathers'.

Of course, such stories are not uncommon in mythological accounts and generally reflect a dual origin. In this case, Meroveus – or whoever lies behind that name – appears to have had Germanic ancestry (Clodion) and foreign ancestry (the water monster), perhaps from across the seas. As historical records concerning the early Merovingians are completely lacking, nothing further can be added. However, certain characteristics of their dynasty must be emphasised: they were never crowned (Clovis was baptised in Reims, not crowned) but were considered kings from the age of twelve; they stubbornly refused to cut their hair; they were reputed to practise magic and possess supernatural powers. In short, although the Merovingians were, for the most part, bloodthirsty tyrants and unscrupulous murderers, their family enjoyed a quite unique reputation, a veritable *aura*—let us not say mystical, but at the very least 'sacred'— in a sense that was, moreover, far more pagan than Christian, Clovis's conversion having been nothing more than a shrewd political manoeuvre, with little impact on his personal life, nor indeed on that of his descendants.

Yet, amidst the tangled history of Clovis's descendants, where the various kings fought amongst themselves, emerges the figure of Dagobert II, who, following an exile in Britain, was assassinated in December 679, undoubtedly on the orders of the mayor of the palace – a Carolingian in this instance – Pepin of Heristal. This Dagobert II was buried in the royal chapel of Saint-Rémy in Stenay, in the Ardennes, and, in 872, he was canonised by the Pope, an exceptional event at that time. And power passed into the hands of another Merovingian branch, those whom posterity describes as the 'lazy kings', who were themselves the playthings

of the Carolingian mayors of the palace before being definitively eliminated, in the person of Childeric III, deposed by Pepin the Short in 751.

Dagobert II is therefore, officially, the last Merovingian of the elder branch. He had married Gisèle, the daughter of Béra II, Count of Razès, in his second marriage. But this is where history meets legend: Dagobert II is said to have had a son from this marriage, who is said to have taken refuge with his grandfather and founded a line, thus ensuring the continuity of the legitimate Merovingian dynasty. The figure of this Sigebert IV is certainly intriguing. His historical existence is certain, but formal evidence remains non-existent, save for the so-called parchments found by Abbé Saunière in his church, the originals of which no one has ever seen. That said, it is more than likely that this tradition is authentic and that Sigebert IV himself became Count of Razès. Among his distant descendants, in the 13th century, we may mention the Count of La Marche, Hugh of Lusignan, and the Duchess of Brittany, Alix, who, in various capacities, took part in the feudal struggles against Blanche of Castile and Louis IX, as allies of Raymond VII of Toulouse. Whatever the truth of this confused history, one cannot help but wonder whether there is not, surrounding the Cathars' 'treasure', an attempt at blackmail concerning the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty. To complete this delicate dossier, one must not forget the strange 'affair' Nicolas Poussin, the painting *The *Shepherds of Arcadia**, the alleged secrets held by the painter and offered by him to Nicolas Fouquet, and the latter's fall from grace. All this is perplexing: one senses the presence of a mystery, one that gives rise to conjectures which would be difficult to refute, a mystery that cannot simply be dismissed out of hand.

This is all the more strange given that the legend of the Holy Grail itself is shrouded in mystery, both in terms of the exact nature of the sacred object known as the Grail and the context in which is presented, in particular, all that which

concerns the lineage of the guardians of the Grail. If Wolfram refers to them as
'Templars', this term should not be taken literally, even though the Templars, let us repeat, formed an alliance with the Cathars—whom they very often protected—thereby contravening the most basic rules of discipline within the Roman Church.

The issue is twofold: the first concerns the reality of the Holy Grail and the concepts it embodies; the second challenges the Cathars' understanding of the nature of Jesus.

The first section highlights one of the most common practices among poets and writers of the 12th and 13th centuries: wordplay, or, if you prefer, phonetic kabbalism, of which Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Kyôt* appears to be a striking example. But here, the focus is on the Grail. In Chrétien de Troyes's text, the Grail is not yet 'holy'. It is merely a simple vessel, closer to the cauldron of abundance and inspiration of the Welsh bards than to the Cistercian chalice containing the blood of Christ. In Chrétien's continuators, and in the Cistercian versions, it clearly becomes the *Holy* Grail: the holiness of the contents (the blood of Christ) passing to the container (the cup, the vessel or the chalice). And in Middle French, where spelling was not yet fixed, the variants observed in the manuscripts reveal a combination of the two terms 'holy' and
'grail'. Thus we find the forms *sangral*, *sangreal*, *sangraal*. And in the 15th century, in the English text by Thomas Malory, compiler of all the Arthurian legends, the term *sangreal* clearly predominates.

The play on words lies precisely in this form. For the classic and standard hyphenation '*san-greal*' can easily be replaced by another: '*sang-real*'. Yet '*sang real*', in modern French, translates as '*royal blood*'. Could the Grail simply be, in an esoteric sense, *'royal blood'*, that is to say, an indication of a royal lineage, consisting of the family of the Kings of the Grail, whom most texts trace, via Joseph of Arimathea, back to the biblical King David?

The idea seems appealing. *It is merely a hypothesis*, but it is based on a constant feature found in all versions of the legend: the 'Holy' Grail is held exclusively by the members of a sacred lineage that stretches back in time, very far back, to the era of King David. Whether it be Lancelot du Lac and his son Galahad the Pure, whether it be Perceval, whether it be Perlesvaux, whether it be Parzival, the hero of the Grail is the nephew of the Fisher King and the initiating hermit (Trévrizent in Wolfram) and a descendant of Joseph of Arimathea, himself a descendant of David, and the possessor of the celestial emerald used to craft the vessel known as the Grail.

Admittedly, the details of this lineage—which is, after all, purely mythological—remain strange to say the least: they feature biblical figures, somewhat marginal bishops, and kings borrowed from Celtic tradition, such as Évallach, which is none other than the name of the Isle of Avalon, that is to say, paradise in the Druidic tradition. But there is a continuity, and Wolfram himself strives to highlight it, even setting the stage for what will happen after Parzival: Lohengrin will thus be the ancestor of the kings of Jerusalem, and also of the Dukes of Lorraine: and the *royal blood* of the Grail lineage will even be found, according to some, in the Guise family (who knew full well what they were getting into when claiming the French crown) and in that of the Habsburgs, one of whose last members is said to have taken a keen interest in Abbé Saunière and the Rennes-le-Château affair.

All this is perplexing. But it is highly doubtful that anything can be gleaned from the numerous 'secret files' opened in recent times without providing any proof of the authenticity of these so-called documents. All that remains is the hypothesis, or hypotheses, for everyone is free to offer their own interpretation or hold their own convictions.

But there is nonetheless a curious tradition concerning Rennes-le-Château and the Razès, relating to a certain Mary Magdalene, whose veneration is attested in the Razès in numerous places, and under the patronage of which has been

consecrated the church of Rennes-le-Château. It is difficult to deny this 'presence' of Mary Magdalene, and the famous 'Magdala Tower', erected by Abbé Saunière, supposedly to house his library, stands there to assert this presence loud and clear, and in plain sight.

To attempt to find an explanation, one must start with certain Cathar conceptions of the figure of Jesus. For the Cathars, Jesus has always posed a problem. He is not the Son of God, or if he is, according to certain Cathar schools, Satan is another Son of God: the two share the world, as it were, and are the symbols of this merciless battle waged between Good and Evil.

The majority of Cathars believed that Jesus was an angel who had come to 'awaken' souls slumbering within Matter. But this is where nuances of interpretation come into play: one is led to suppose the existence of a second Christ. Indeed, the earthly Christ who died on the cross in Jerusalem could only have been evil, and this Mary Magdalene, who appears as a privileged figure at his side, was certainly his concubine, or even his wife. The true Christ, however, was born and crucified in an invisible world, in that 'higher world' which, for the Cathars, is not yet Heaven, but the true battlefield where the two principles of Good and Evil clash.[54] Thus, the earthly Christ led a fully human life, and may well have had descendants. What became of these descendants of Jesus and Mary Magdalene?

However, we know that the *real* life of Jesus Christ – unvarnished by the Gospels – poses certain problems. Firstly, it is inconceivable that he was a carpenter in Nazareth, as that town did not exist in his time. This is a legend that arose because Jesus belonged to the Nazarene sect. Furthermore, he was certainly not born in a stable or in a cave: this is merely a symbolic location. He was not poor, and, according to the official Evangelists themselves, belonged to the royal family of

[54] Arno Borst, **The Cathars**, p. 142.

David. Between puberty and the age of thirty, Jesus disappears: what was he doing? The way he preaches certainly shows that he had received an education. From whom? That remains a mystery. He is also called *rabbi*, meaning 'teacher' in the sense of the Latin 'magister' and not in the sense of '*dominus*'. Yet this title was reserved for 'doctors' of theology who were required to be married. Moreover, celibacy was frowned upon for any normal man in Jewish society even in Jesus's own time. This implies that he must have been married. The Gospels have completely erased Jesus's sexuality, having already erased Mary's. But what was so reprehensible about Jesus being married? One wonders, all the more so because Jesus, again according to the Gospels, never condemned marriage, unlike Saint Paul; quite the contrary.

So, when we examine certain episodes in the life of Jesus, particularly the famous 'Wedding at Cana', questions arise. Why does Jesus, at this wedding, behave like a true host? Could it be that he is, in fact, the groom? And who else could his wife be, if not that enigmatic Mary Magdalene to whom he first appeared after his resurrection? There is much to be said about the case of Mary Magdalene, who is clearly in love with him, who comes from a wealthy background, and who was probably one of his earliest disciples—and certainly not the repentant prostitute we are constantly told about, even though there is no mention of her in the **Gospels**.

It is upon these observations and questions that the tradition of Mary Magdalene's arrival in the Razès is based. Following Jesus' death and the persecutions against the Jews (Christians being regarded merely as a Jewish sect), she is said to have left Palestine and landed on the Occitan coast, perhaps in Marseille, perhaps at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. She is said to have subsequently settled, *with her children*, either on Sainte-Baume, where her cult is evident, or in the Razès, where her

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[55] See on this subject the collective work by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, Paris, Pygmalion, 1983, in particular pp. 293–309.

Her cult is no less significant. And her children are said to have established a lineage, with one of her descendants even marrying a Nordic king – *perhaps Clodion the Hairy*, father of Meroveus. Thus, Meroveus, born of two fathers—that is to say, of dual origin (the sea monster symbolising the overseas influence, the Jewish ancestry)—would be both the heir to the Frankish kings, magicians and miracle-workers, sacred *pagan* figures, and to the lineage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, a divine lineage if ever there was one, even if this Jesus was merely the earthly double of the one who fought Evil in the higher world.

The hypothesis – unfortunately all too often presented as a certainty – is therefore that the Cathars' 'treasure', kept in Rennes-le-Château or elsewhere in the Razès region, consists of evidence of the existence of a Merovingian line, a divine and authentic dynasty, ousted by the Carolingian usurpers and their Capetian successors. This would explain Blanche of Castile's interest in this 'treasure', which threatened to call into question the legitimacy of her son Louis IX and, of course, of the entire Capetian dynasty. Was this the secret known to Nicolas Poussin, which he is said to have passed on to Nicolas Fouquet? Was this the secret discovered by Abbé Béranger Saunière, which he allegedly traded for his silence with the relevant authorities, foremost among them the Church, given that the Roman Church played a less than glorious role in the replacement of the Merovingians by the Carolingians?

To this, one can only reply, 'Why not?' It is a hypothesis as valid as any other, and one that has the merit of shaking the very foundations of an official history that is all too often truncated and riddled with inaccuracies or lies. Unfortunately, the myth of *the* Great *Monarch* comes into play here: and this King of the World, who will come—let us have no doubt—especially around the year 2000, can only belong to a divine lineage and emerge from the mysterious valleys of Razès, like a new Arthur awakening from his peaceful slumber on the Isle of Avalon. Come to think of it, why shouldn't the Isle of Avalon be situated in the vicinity of Rennes-le-Château? And do we know that the

Did the Cathars believe that Frederick II, the emperor long suspected of heresy and neo-pagan practices, was not dead, that he would one day reappear and save the Perfect Ones and the Believers, uniting them into a new nation? This is the myth of Frederick Barbarossa, slumbering in a mountain in Germany. This is the myth of Arthur. It is a myth as universal as that of the Great Monarch. But beware: let us hope the Great Monarch is not the Antichrist!

As Jean Robin so aptly puts it, 'the folklore and traditions of every country assign a distinct geography to the forces of darkness, just as there is a sacred geography of places of pilgrimage, for example. And when considering the area around Rennes from this perspective, one must admit that landmarks… and haunts abound, compelling us to envisage a deliberate choice, or rather a mysterious correspondence between the place – a mysterious crucible – and the alchemy that took shape there. To such an extent that one comes to no longer know whether the local area merely served as a privileged medium for certain influences, or whether this *fateful place* itself secreted its own egregores, to use occultist language, and in some way magnetised the *thought-forms* (to remain within the magicians' jargon) of the mystifiers."[56] These are harsh words indeed. It is perhaps no coincidence that, in the vicinity of Arques, a hill rising to 666 metres—the number of the Beast of the Apocalypse—has been named Rocher de Saint-Michel. But, as Péguy said, 'those who are good for sin belong to the same realm as those who are good for Grace'. It is then that dualism overcomes its contradictions.

There is, however, another theory regarding this sacred lineage of which the Cathars are said to have been aware. If one analyses in detail all the texts relating to the legend of the Grail, and if one examines carefully this which concerns Lancelot of the Lake,

[56] Jean Robin, *Rennes-le-Château, the Enchanted Hill*, p. 163.

undoubtedly the key figure of the entire cycle, one arrives at some curious observations.

For Lancelot du Lac's real name is Galahad. And he belongs to the sacred line of the Kings of the Grail: indeed, he is the culmination of that line. And if he himself cannot be King of the Grail, it is because of the sin of adultery he commits with Queen Guinevere, or more precisely because, for him, his Grail *is* Queen Guinevere, the embodiment of Beauty, Perfection and **absolute** Love[57]. But it is his son Galahad who will successfully complete the quest for the Holy Grail; in other words, who will ensure the triumph of *royal blood*.

Yet Galahad is not only the heir to the sacred lineage through his father Lancelot, who descends from Joseph of Arimathea and thus from King David, but his mother is the daughter of the Fisher King, the bearer of the Grail, herself a descendant of Joseph of Arimathea and David. Galaad, a figure invented by writers in the early 13th century, specifically during the regency of Blanche of Castile, presents himself as the most perfect embodiment of this divine lineage. And just as Galahad, after gazing into the depths of the Holy Grail, exclaims that he possesses the knowledge of all the world's secrets and dies immediately, his human nature unable to bear such light, we may conclude that Galahad, in that supreme moment, *attains Cathar Perfection*: he is, in a sense, swept away by the divine Light. And why is he able to have this vision? Because at that moment, he is conscious of *the royal blood* that flows within him.

But Lancelot outlives his son, and when the Arthurian world collapses, following the death of Queen Guinevere, he becomes a hermit and ends his life in piety. And one believes one recognises, through this fictional character of Lancelot, another figure—a very real one this time—a hermit from the Merovingian era, and thus from the Arthurian age, a mysterious

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[57] J. Markale, *Lancelot and Arthurian Chivalry*, Paris, Imago, 1985. I have explained in detail Lancelot's motivations during the Quest for the Grail.

Saint Frambourg or Frambaut, who is believed to be the ancestor of the Capetians.

This hypothesis is therefore as follows: the Cathars' 'Treasure' is nothing other than the knowledge of the sacred and mystical lineage of the Grail, tracing back to King David, passing through Joseph of Arimathea, perhaps through Mary Magdalene and Jesus, and culminating in a Lancelot du Lac who is said to be Saint Frambaut. Therein lies the authentic 'Holy Grail', that is to say, the *Royal Blood*. And it is proof of this sacred lineage that Blanche of Castile is said to have sought.

To this hypothesis, one can only reply: "Why not?" But one must admit that it is the most logical and the most plausible from all the explanations concerning the
The Cathars' 'treasure', carried away by four Perfects from Montségur one night in March 1244, before the fortress surrendered. There is nothing magical about it, nothing supernatural.

But is it known that the liturgical service of Saint Mary Magdalene includes a hymn, the second verse of which reads: 'The lost drachma is hidden in the royal treasury, and the precious stone, once cleansed of the mire, outshines the stars in splendour.'

Is this not a description of the Grail, and beyond that, an indication of the purification of the emerald that fell from Lucifer's brow? Then the *royal blood* flowing through the veins of the Sleeping Angels may shine in all its splendour.

VII

THE CATHARS AND MEMORY

Although the Cathars ceased to exist as such at the beginning of the 14th century, this by no means implies that Cathar thought also disappeared, swallowed up once and for all by the triumph of orthodoxy. The belief in the existence of two fundamental principles in perpetual opposition is found in many later speculations. The idea of the fall of the Angels continues to shape attempts to explain a world subject to the powers of Evil and in which the human soul feels imprisoned. The notion of salvation attained through renunciation of this world remains a recognised constant in all ascetic attitudes, as does the notion of purification necessary for any spiritual elevation. In fact, when considering the broad outlines of Christian spirituality since the condemnation of the Cathar heresy, one is led to wonder exactly why this condemnation was issued: there is nothing in this doctrine that could truly shock a Christian conscience. Must we conclude, then, that this merciless condemnation was aimed primarily at people who claimed they could do without the Church to ensure their salvation? The same question would arise later, at the time of the Reformation.

Indeed, the Reformers of the sixteenth century appear to have adopted certain ideas from Catharism and, without a shadow of a doubt, the Cathars' criticisms of a Roman Church guilty of becoming mired in materialism, of having forgotten its divine mission, and of having joined the ranks of

Satan in order to better deceive the souls who still believed in the Light. Calvinism, in particular, through its austere vision of spiritual asceticism, its rejection of salvation obtained by any means other than personal enlightenment, and its endeavour to define the Righteous in the midst of a fundamentally evil world, followed paths parallel to those taken by the various Cathar movements. Of course, the belief in the transmigration of souls, which is evident in Catharism, although it was never officially codified, has completely disappeared: it is in a single lifetime that human beings can hope to attain salvation, and no other experience is possible. But it is no coincidence that Calvinism, a severe doctrine with a very northern spirit, which corresponds very little to the southern temperament, spread easily, and has often persisted, in regions that had been strongly influenced by Catharism.

But all this amounts to intellectual speculation and concerns only certain elites, those classified as intellectual leaders. Just as Cathar clerics had, in one way or another, been influenced by earlier teachings—Bogomil, Manichaean or even Orthodox—other clerics took up the Cathar tradition, developed it further and gave it new directions. This is a constant phenomenon in the history of human thought. However, we must not forget that Catharism was also lived out in daily life by a fairly large number of the faithful. It would be surprising if it had not left certain traces in that daily life, in what might be called ‘popular memory’.

Let us not dwell on common symbols: they endure, even when they have lost their evocative power and their exact meaning is no longer understood. It is clear that the Occitan Cross, the Cathar Cross and the Huguenot Cross are cut from the same cloth. This is all the more evident in the case of the Huguenot Cross: it has adopted the Cathar dove, even if it does not convey exactly the same concept. Among the Calvinists, the dove represents the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit alone. Among the Cathars, it was

rather the soul freed from Satan's grasp, awaiting the moment to take flight towards the higher realms.

This is the interpretation that can be given to this legend from the Montségur region, the legend of the fairy who appears in the form of a dove, and who is also identified with Esclarmonde. The fairy tried to save a man by bringing him wealth and happiness: but this attempt could only succeed if the man respected one essential rule: not to call her a 'fairy' – or a 'madwoman'. In other versions, the man must not get angry with the fairy, or must not strike her, even lightly. Or, in the Poitou legend of Melusine, he must not know the fairy's true nature, for he is not yet capable of bearing the sight of a superior being. Ultimately, Melusine may well represent the Cathar Perfect One who seeks to save those still trapped by the world's illusions; yet, within an orthodox Christian context, she has been repressed into the depths of the unconscious and *demonised* by being portrayed as a 'demon'. This is proof that the Cathar message—a message proclaiming the possibility that every being has to purify itself—has not been understood, and that the world is not yet ready to rediscover the Original Light.

The same applies to these traditions concerning mysterious women who are sometimes encountered in the valleys, near springs or rivers. This is the case in the Rennes-le-Château area, where these women are known as '*mitounes*'. It is said that they lie in wait for young men and seduce them. Sometimes they take the form of washerwomen by the banks of a stream: this reflects a very widespread folk motif, that of the 'Night Washerwomen', and in Brittany they are particularly malevolent. Let us make no mistake: in the minds of rural folk, these fairies, these *mitounes*, these
'washerwomen', like the Pyrenean 'White Ladies', are the incarnations of Heresy. What they represent are heretical doctrines that can seduce those who venture anywhere without caution, and above all without relying on the official certainties, otherwise known as

conformism. The fable appears here to be highly eloquent, and it is the result of a systematic stigmatisation of everything that is marginal.

But sometimes the situation is reversed: hidden beneath strange guises, heresy – or at the very least, unconventional thinking – resurfaces and gains new power. Many folk tales that appear quite innocuous on the surface breathe new life into ancient beliefs, thus demonstrating that the collective memory never forgets.

This is the case with the well-known tale of Beauty and the Beast. Depending on the region, it takes on different hues, and the details vary. But the plot remains the same. It tells of a young girl who, as a result of her father's recklessness, is given to a mysterious beast endowed with certain supernatural powers. To save her father's life, this young girl must marry the Beast, thereby overcoming her revulsion. If she succeeds in this trial, she will one day discover that the Beast she has married is in fact a very handsome prince who had been the victim of a spell.

However, things do not always turn out this way. The young girl may fail to overcome her aversion, and the Beast must wait a long time for the act of salvation that will restore his former appearance. Or else, the young girl breaks a taboo, asking a forbidden question, or catching the Beast in a private moment. Then the Beast must go elsewhere, and the young girl must set out in search of him, usually a great distance away: and to find the one destined for her, she will have to wear out three pairs of iron-shod shoes.

The symbolism of this story is simple. The Beast—that is, the Prince under the spell—is an Angel held captive by Satan, an Angel who, following the Fall, found himself in a physical body described as particularly hideous. The Angel's only hope of regaining his original nature is to inspire genuine love in a young girl. We are right at the heart of a Cathar dilemma: if the world is imperfect and doomed to Evil, it is because it lacks Charity, that is to say, perfect Love. By reintroducing perfect Love into this world, we banish Evil and liberate the souls held captive within it

. It is a rather beautiful idea, and the strength of the tale lies in conveying this message without needing to explain it, without resorting to reasoning. It is through such images, which appeal to the heart rather than the intellect, that the Cathar spirit endures.

Another tale, also widely known, bears witness to the survival of this spirit: the tale generally known as
'The soulless body'. There are many versions of this tale, particularly in the Basque Country and in Armorican Brittany, where the theme is particularly prominent.

This is a monstrous creature whose behaviour is diabolical. Endowed with a ferocious appetite, readily resorting to cannibalism, it takes the form of an ogre and commits the worst injustices, notably demanding that the prettiest girl in the land, usually a princess, be delivered to it every year. A daring young man, or sometimes a man of mature years, decides to defeat the monster, and to do so he begins by securing the cooperation of the 'wife' of *the Soulless Corpse*. She warns the daring young man that he cannot attempt anything against the monster because it cannot be killed, but she manages to discover the secret. She forces him to speak and reveal why he is invulnerable:

'I cannot die, for my soul is not in my body. And my soul is safely kept. It lies in the thirteenth egg of a partridge, which is inside a hare that no hunter can reach. And, moreover, the hare is inside the body of a terrible wolf that devours everything it sees. And this wolf is inside the belly of a lion that no one would dare to face."[58] Such is the version from Upper Brittany, but the version from Lower Brittany appears even more precise:

"I was born of a mermaid and a werewolf. My name is the Body without a Soul. – What?" said the princess, "a body without a soul? How is it that you can live?" – By the virtue of a

[58] J. Markale, *Contes populaires de toutes les Bretagne*, Rennes, Ouest-France, 1977, p. 107.

a great spirit who has given me great power. And yet, my power is nothing compared to what it might have been, had I been able to have my soul. – So you have a soul that is not with you? – No, unfortunately,' said the Body, 'it is not with me. If I had it, there is nothing I could not accomplish. With my soul, I would have turned the universe upside down. – So it is very difficult for you to have your soul, it seems? – Too difficult, unfortunately. I have sought it many times, and I have never been able to reach it. It is for this reason that I have been placed here, permanently, on this island in the middle of the sea. And yet, my soul is not far from here… about ten leagues away, on another island which is very large."[59]

The references contained in this tale—which, let us repeat, is a folk tale from the oral tradition—have an unmistakable Cathar connotation when viewed through the lens of the doctrine of the radical dualists. According to this doctrine, there are three constituent elements of being: the body, the soul and the spirit. The crux of the matter lies in agreeing on the distinction between the soul and the spirit: this is the eternal problem of *yin* and *yang*, of *the animus* and *the anima*, and of all the semiological disputes concerning *mens* and *spiritus*, or indeed the definitions proposed by the various occultist schools regarding the astral body, the subtle body or the egregore. To date, no one has managed to reach an agreement, and the Cathars have not found a satisfactory solution. However, whatever the exact meaning of the term, the radical Cathars maintained that Satan had seduced and perverted only the third part of the Angels, in other words their souls and not their spirits. They went so far as to claim that in every incarnation (which is equivalent to the Fall), the angelic soul left its body in heaven, and that it was Satan who imprisoned these souls in material bodies. But the link between the body and the soul—which is the spirit—*lies elsewhere*, in an intermediate world, between heaven and earth: and it is in this intermediate world that it floats, like the *Elohim* in the

[59] J. Markale, *The Celtic Tradition*, p. 205.

above the primordial waters, seeking the soul he must recognise as his double. When he succeeds in discovering it, enlightenment is achieved and the being then becomes a Cathar, that is to say, a Perfect One. In short, this spirit is a kind of guardian angel who enables the reunion of the principles scattered by Evil.

In the specific context of the tale of **The Body Without a Soul**, the character's origin is presented as fantastical (a mermaid and a werewolf, diabolical mythical creatures) and the Creator is a *great spirit*. Is this the creator of the soul—who would be God—or the creator of the body—who would be Satan? It is difficult to say. But what is certain is that the soul was deliberately separated from the body to prevent the being from wielding its true power and *turning the universe upside down*. The weakness of the Body without a Soul is a kind of punishment, a curse that deprives it of its means. One cannot fail to see in this detail the fall and imprisonment of the Angels within matter. *But their soul (or their spirit) retains its power intact*. It is merely separated. If the being manages to recover its soul, it returns to its primordial state, that of essence. But for the Body without a Soul, this seems utterly impossible to achieve: 'My soul is in a fiery-red egg, and is found within the body of a dove. The dove is within a fox, the fox within a wolf, the wolf within a boar, the boar within a leopard, the leopard within a tiger, the tiger within a lion, the lion within an ogre who is neither man nor **beast"[60]**.

A strange tale… It brings to mind another folk tale, which is also a traditional nursery rhyme: a goat or a billy goat that 'won't come out of the cabbage'. To get the animal out, they fetch a dog, but the dog refuses to obey, and so **on.[61]** In fact, all this refers to an archaic theme recognisable in the famous Nut of the Kabbalists:

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[60] J. Markale, *The Celtic Tradition*, p. 206.

[61] See in particular the curious tale 'Histoire du bouc de Boulaud' in J. Markale, *Contes occitans*, pp. 60–65. This Limousin version is presented in a facetious manner, but the underlying pattern is perfectly clear.

One must remove the shell and the envelope to reach the central point, that is to say, the divine hidden within. The soul of the monstrous being described in the tale is its divine component, which its fall has imprisoned within another body, within another substance, in order to prevent any possibility of reunion. Only the intervention of a hero, or a heroine, can grant access to this soul locked within the egg, which itself is found inside a dove—a highly significant detail. But in this case, the hero or heroine can simply break the egg: the soul flies away and the body can no longer live, for it was, after all, subtly bound to that soul.

Here is a fine example of how a Cathar theme has endured in the oral folk tradition. There are many others that could be cited, all of which would highlight symbols commonly used by the theologians of Albi. It seems that after their disappearance, the Perfect Ones were keen to leave their message for future generations: yet they were careful not to carve this message in stone or commit it to writing; the oral tradition remains the safest and most effective way to convey something at all levels without attracting the wrath of the censors.

Art, and everything that can be classified as artistic—oral storytelling, for example—is apparently of the utmost innocence. It is a *game*. The avowed aim is to entertain, or to *charm*. But let us reflect on the meaning of '*to charm*'. Magic does not so much consist of uttering words incomprehensible to the average person. Magic is *the art* of conveying something under the guise of a *game*.

And what better medium than theatre, especially when it combines music with speech? We now know, or can guess, what the true meaning of an opera such as Mozart's *The Magic Flute* might be. It is not too difficult to grasp the underlying themes of a complex work such as Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* and its obvious connections with the Cathars, via Wolfram von Eschenbach. So why not discuss another work of this kind, a work that is quite

strange and which confuses more than it enlightens, the famous *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Maurice Maeterlinck and Claude Debussy?

It is indeed a coming-of-age drama, a theatrical and musical *piece*, through the twists and turns of which *the Cathar problem of the angelic soul* is expressed in the most noble manner.

This is a work widely recognised as Symbolist. It therefore necessarily contains symbols. Some are obvious at first glance. Others are less easily discernible but no less effective. This applies first and foremost to the central character of Mélisande, who has moved so many to tears. One must always be wary of tragic heroines who move us to tears because they are touching. There is usually something hidden beneath the surface. Is not Racine's 'tender and sweet' Andromache, in reality, a formidable, calculating and calculating woman of strong will, prepared to do anything to ensure her own triumph and that of her son?

Who, indeed, is this Mélisande, about whom we are told almost nothing, and who wanders through the gloomy castle and the vast park where Arkel reigns, constantly moving from shadow to light and from light to shadow? Prince Golaud met her by a fountain where she was weeping. But she is not Melusine: she was lying in wait for Raymondin to offer him, along with herself, wealth and power. Mélisande expects nothing: she is utterly devastated. Where does she come from? From elsewhere, but we shall never know what this *'elsewhere'* with its vague contours is. All we know is that a crown glitters in the water, 'the crown he gave me'. We do not know who this 'he' is. Golaud wants to retrieve the crown. Mélisande refuses, just as she refuses any contact with Golaud: 'Do not touch me! Or I shall throw myself into the water!'

But Goland takes her with him nonetheless, and they marry. Here is Mélisande in the strange kingdom of Arkel. This kingdom has a name: *Allemonde*. It is a play on words, of course: one might see a vague resemblance to 'Allemande', or even *Franglais*, 'tout le monde' (*all* the world), or, thanks to the Celtic root *all* ('other'), a veritable 'Other World'. The Symbolist poets have done worse at times. But why not

Might it not be ‘Ah! The world!’—with a hint of contempt that rather aptly characterises the material world, according to Cathar doctrine? Moreover, Golaud is a sort of devil. He is the embodiment of the Cathar Satan who imprisons the soul of the Fallen Angel (Mélisande) within the material world (marriage). Mélisande is a prisoner of the world of satanic illusions. But in a way, she brought it upon herself, since she refused to retrieve the crown that had fallen into the water and agreed to marry Golaud, the tyrant Golaud who in fact usurps the power of her grandfather Arkel, a name that evokes the Archangel but also the village of Arques, in the Razès. Come to think of it, does Golaud not bring to mind the Golem of occult tradition? Unless it is quite simply the Breton word *golo*, ‘light’. Could he, too, be the ‘Fallen Light’, that is to say, Lucifer after the revolt and the fall into the abyss? Yet Lucifer retains within him that essential nature which is Light, even as he strives to plunge beings into darkness.

Mélisande appears to be playing along with Golaud. She is the very picture of a perverse teenager. She lies. She will betray Golaud, but she will never admit it, always leaving room for doubt and uncertainty: she is an excellent pupil of Satan. And she is perfectly aware of what she is doing when she sets her sights on Pelléas and leads him to his downfall.

Pelléas bears a characteristic name: it is the spelling, in Malory’s English text, of Pellès, the Fisher-King; that is to say, in Celtic mythology, Pwyll, a sort of deity of the Otherworld, of the underworld, the husband of the goddess Rhiannon, whose name means ‘great queen’ and who often appears in the form of a mare. Maeterlinck’s choice of the name Pelléas is not arbitrary, and the reference to the Fisher King remains quite clear: is not Pelléas’s father ill, mysteriously ill and invisible, always on the brink of death, yet confined to his bed of suffering?

And Pelléas is about to be seduced by Mélisande, just as Anfortas, according to Wagner, was once seduced by Kundry the

Witch. Mélisande, whose name evokes a Mélissende from the chronicles of the Crusades, but also the serpentine fairy Mélusine, is also Kundry, Klingsor's accomplice who holds the knights captive in her garden of delights, thanks to the charm of her 'Flower-Maids'.

But beware: the wayward teenager Mélisande, in the role of Kundry, or the 'hideous maiden with the mule' as described by Chrétien de Troyes, *is also the messenger of the Grail*; and this is where everything changes in Maeterlinck and Debussy's operatic drama. Mélisande will show Pelléas a path that he cannot quite discern. By playing with her ring by the fountain, Mélisande frees herself from Golaud. Moreover, at that very moment, Golaud falls from his horse in an inexplicable manner. And when he realises that Mélisande has lost the ring, he forces her to go and fetch it immediately. But Mélisande has lied: she claimed she had lost it in a cave by the sea. And that is where she leads Pelléas. The symbolism of the ring and the cave speaks volumes. From now on, Pelléas and Mélisande are bound together. Golaud knows this all too well; he tries to impress Pelléas, his younger brother, by taking him into dark underground passages that reek of death. The tragedy is that Pelléas, who still has not grasped the meaning of Mélisande's mission, wants to leave, and *to leave alone*. Melisande then draws him into a farewell scene. But she knows that Golaud is lying in wait for them. And Golaud kills Pelléas. Pelléas will not leave. Or rather, freed, in spite of himself, from his mortal shell, at the very moment he was crying out his love for Melisande, here he is once again filled with the divine Light: he returns to the original realm. And Mélisande, after giving life to a little girl who will bear all the sadness of the world, dies in turn, and joins Pelléas in the light regained. The Grail was within everyone's reach. Golaud did not find it, he who admits to being 'like a blind man searching for his treasure at the bottom of the sea'. And Arkel can only repeat: 'If I were God, I would have pity on the hearts of men…' A beautiful phrase. Arkel is pitiable. But only total Love, that is to say, pure Charity, can awaken the souls that have been swallowed up.

Golaud, for his part, is still a long way from such sublime love. He is a violent man, a hunter, a killer. He spills blood because he can only sustain himself on blood to give his body the appearance of life. He is an undead creature, a sort of vampire. He is an illusion. He is the deceiving Satan; he is Klingsor. Yet he still possesses the formidable power to imprison souls in his fairy-tale garden, which is far too dark to be paradise.

For the soul, according to the most ancient traditions, is irrevocably bound to blood. 'You shall not eat flesh with its soul, that is to say, with its blood' (*Genesis*, IX, 4). The Cathars knew this very well, and the Perfect Ones forbade themselves any food containing blood. And when, in the Cistercian versions, the Holy Grail is described as containing the blood of Christ, the intention is simply to convey that the Grail contains *the divine soul*, that which is found in the kernel of the nut, in the egg of the Body without a Soul, contained within a dove—that very dove which brings a host upon the Grail-Stone.

The Cathars are, in one way or another, closely linked to the legend of the Grail, the *Holy Grail*.

Or of the *Royal Blood*.

The Cohort of the Perfect Ones is the Sacred Lineage of the Grail, those who have awakened to the Light that comes from above. Mélisande brought the message. Through her perversity and ambiguity, the mysterious young girl from elsewhere is one of those bird-women of ancient legends. She delivered her message to the Fallen Angels, for the Fallen Angels can only be saved by one of their own, since they were corrupted by one of their own. And Melisande, like Galahad, could no longer hold on to her life. She flies away once more in the form of a dove. But she has given birth to a little girl who will carry on the message within the sacred Lineage of the guardians of the Grail.

Those in whose *veins* flows *royal blood*—that is to say, the divine and luminous Soul that shines in the eyes of the Perfect Ones—on 16 March 1244, beneath the *hill* of Montségur, whilst a demonic pyre is lit that never ceases to burn…

Bieuzy-Lanvaux
Villeneuve-sur-Lot
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